

Brutalism in Brazilian Architecture The Similarities and Differences between Brazilian and European Brutalism

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ABSTRACT

This paper has the aim to analyze the Brutalist architecture in Brazil focused in the work of three great architects such as Vilanova Artigas, Lina Bo Bardi and Paulo Mendes da Rocha. At the same time to display a clear picture of the development of the Brutalism in Europe. Attention is to find out and to evidence the similarities and differences between brutalist architecture in Brazil in front of the Brutalism in Europe. This paper has to discuss which were trends and characteristics in brutalist architecture in Brazil and reasons of his life longer than the European counterpart.

KEYWORDS:

Architecture, Artigas, Brazil, Brutalism, Bo Bardi, Modernism, Mendes da Rocha, New Brutalism.

***“The face of world does not conform to the brutalist aesthetic,
but the conscience of the world’s architecture has been
permanently enriched by the Brutalist ethic.”***

*Reyner Banham,
(The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?)*

1 BRUTALISM IN THE INTERNATIONAL PANORAMA

1.1. The term "brutalism"

The British architects Alison and Peter Smithson coined the term in 1953, from the French *béton brut*, or "raw concrete", a phrase used by Le Corbusier to describe the poured board-marked concrete with which he constructed many of his post-World War II buildings. The term gained wide currency when the British architectural critic Reyner Banham used it in the title of his 1966 book, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*, to characterize a somewhat recently established cluster of architectural approaches, particularly in Europe. The architectural style known as **Brutalism** and the architectural and urban theory known as **New Brutalism** may be regarded as two different movements, although the terms are often used interchangeably. The New Brutalism of the British members of Team 10, Alison and Peter Smithson, is more related to the theoretical reform of the CIAM than to "béton brut". Reyner Banham formulated this difference in the title of his book: "The New Brutalism - Ethic or Aesthetic?"

1.2. Characteristics

Brutalist buildings usually are formed with striking repetitive angular geometries, and, where concrete is used, often revealing the texture of the wooden forms used for the in-situ casting. Although concrete is the material most widely associated with Brutalist architecture, not all Brutalist buildings are formed from concrete. Instead, a building may achieve its Brutalist quality through a rough, blocky appearance, and the expression of its structural materials, forms, and (in some cases) services on its exterior. For example, many of Alison and Peter Smithson's private houses are built from brick. Brutalist building materials also include brick, glass, and steel, rough-hewn stone. Conversely, not all buildings exhibiting an exposed concrete exterior can be considered Brutalist, and may belong to one of a range of architectural styles including Constructivism, International Style, Expressionism, Postmodernism, and Deconstructivism.

Another common theme in Brutalist designs is the exposure of the building's functions—ranging from their structure and services to their human use—in the exterior of the building. The design of the Hunstanton School included placing the facility's water tank, normally a hidden service feature, in a prominent, visible tower.

Brutalism as an architectural philosophy, rather than a style, was often also associated with a socialist utopian ideology, which tended to be supported by its designers, especially Alison and Peter Smithson, near the height of the style. Critics argue that this abstract nature of Brutalism makes the style unfriendly and uncommunicative, instead of being integrating and protective, as its proponents intended. Brutalism also is criticized as disregarding the social, historic, and architectural environment of its surroundings, making the introduction of such structures in existing developed areas appear starkly out of place and alien. The failure of positive communities to form early on in some Brutalist structures, possibly due to the larger processes of urban decay that set in after World War II (especially in the United Kingdom), led to the combined unpopularity of both the ideology and the architectural style.

1.3. History

The best known early Brutalist architecture is the work of the Swiss architect Le Corbusier, in particular his *Unité d'Habitation* in 1952 and the 1953 *Secretariat Building* in Chandigarh, India. Brutalism gained considerable momentum in the United Kingdom during the mid twentieth century, as economically depressed (and World War II-ravaged) communities sought inexpensive construction and design methods for low-cost housing, shopping centers, and government buildings. Nonetheless, many architects chose the Brutalist style even when they had large budgets, as they appreciated the 'honesty', the sculptural qualities, and perhaps, the uncompromising, anti-bourgeois, nature of the style. Combined with the socially progressive intentions behind Brutalist streets in the sky housings such as Corbusier's

Unité, Brutalism was promoted as a positive option for forward-moving, modern urban housing. In practice, however, many of the buildings built in this style lacked many of the community-serving features of Corbusier's vision, and instead, developed into claustrophobic, crime-ridden tenements.

1.4. The New Brutalism 1953-1956

The New Brutalism was an architectural movement that begun in an era that sought a 'visual language to give body to their own rough awakening to the social realities of the post-war years'.

The Brutalist sensibility was formed through subtle reworkings of Le Corbusier's *beton brut* manner. The beginning of a post-war urban reidentification had begun. Le Corbusier was a pioneer in the *beton brut* (raw concrete) which he used in such buildings as Unite d'Habitation. The effect of this visually exposed, imprinted surface was seen as a more honest approach and more in-keeping with the principles of the modernism. Corbusier had also influenced many with his new attitudes concerning the primal relationship between man and nature.

Peter and Alison Smithson were seen as the pioneers for the Brutalism movement in Britain. The first reference to the New Brutalism was made by Alison Smithson in 1953. In 1954, the two architects Alison and Peter Smithson completed the *Secondary Modern School at Hunstanton* which was at once accepted as the first Brutalist building. Soon afterwards, they proposed a definition of the budding movement. In a brief and enigmatic statement (one of only two in which they have attempted a clarification), they enlisted traditional Japanese architecture to illustrate the new approach. The Japanese, they argued, showed 'a reverence for the natural world and, from that, for the materials of the built world'. This reverence participated in a general conception of life, leading the Smithson's to declare, famously, that 'we see architecture as the direct result of a way of life'. Notwithstanding the engaging simplicity of these ideas, they were somewhat lost among miscellaneous considerations on Modernism and could hardly have precipitated an architecture movement.



Figure 1: Secondary Modern School at Hunstanton

In an essay written in late 1955, Reyner Banham, the historiographer of the movement, ascribed three characteristics to the new architecture:

- *Memorability of image.*
- *Clear exhibition of structure.*
- *Valuation of materials 'as found'.*

In his book of 1966, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?*, he rejected this early attempt at defining the movement, and he identified three different conceptions of Brutalism in circulation in the mid-1950's. The best evidence in favour of the reality of a Brutalist movement was that the term did become widely used in Britain. But it seemed to have indicated nothing more precise than a sensibility towards materials inspired by Le Corbusier's *béton brut* and a case for rigorous, honest detailing. It was

in fact so inclusive that it became benign and meaningless. Brutalism started with a particular sensibility toward materials, but its values and its objectives remained far too vague to insure the coherence necessary to the constitution of a movement.

2 BRUTALISM IN BRAZIL

2.1. Brutalist trend in Brazilian architecture

In Brazil, the brutalist trend starts from the early 1950s onward in buildings in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, achieving some relevance in the work of a new generation of gifted Paulista architects, who were just then entering the scenario. The beginning of the brutalist trend in Brazil is simultaneous, and not subsequent, to the design competition and construction of Brasília, although it gets more notoriety and consolidates in the 1960s when it gains a broad repercussion all over Brazil. Neither in that moment nor later has Paulista brutalist architecture become hegemonic, locally or nationally, having always simultaneously coexisted with other trends and different orientations.

In the early 1950s the architect João Batista Vilanova Artigas gradually begins to use exposed concrete structures in São Paulo. Just as Artigas other mature architects of that moment started to adopt the brutalist language in their works.

Worldwide brutalist trend underwent a great expansion in the 1960-70s. In the 1980s, the trend begins to fade, in a situation amplified by the debates happening at that time pronouncing the opportunity for a revision of modern architecture.

From the end of the 20th century onward, Paulista brutalist architecture is again under the spotlights, a rediscovery that prizes its avant-garde quality and artistic values. Its place inside Brazilian and international modern architecture field is being reconsidered, and several of its buildings are already considered a significant part of our modern heritage. Paulista brutalist architecture can now be better understood under its own universal and timeless architectural values.

2.2. The Aesthetics of Poverty

The late 1960s was nevertheless a rich period for left-wing culture in Brazil, the unhappy political situation producing an unprecedentedly rich variety of cultural responses, especially from architecture (Vilanova Artigas, Lina Bo Bardi, Arquitetura Nova).

The most obvious and important manifestations of it lie in the so-called Paulista school, a loose grouping established in and around the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism at the University of Sao Paulo (FAU-USP), in large part a response to the circle around Oscar Niemeyer. The undoubted leader of the group was Vilanova Artigas, but other important figures included Paulo Mendes da Rocha, and the Italian-born, naturalized Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi, although she did not constitute part of the social and educational network around Artigas. Its crucial buildings include the FAU-USP itself, designed by Artigas, and Bo Bardi's Museu de Arte de Sao Paulo. Both were completed in 1968, a critical year for Brazilian politics. Both were conceived as essentially public spaces, welcoming to all; both, in their materials and construction, invoked poverty. Bo Bardi referred to her work as 'poor architecture' in a way that invoked the contemporary Italian art movement Arte Povera. Much of what can be described as the Paulista School has also been described as a local variant of Brutalism.

3 BRUTALIST ARCHITECTS IN BRAZIL

3.1. Vilanova Artigas

3.1.1. Life

Vilanova Artigas (June 23, 1915 – January 12, 1985) was one of the most important Brazilian modernist architects, and the founding figure of the Paulista School.

Artigas' work is commonly viewed in three phases. The first phase, from 1937 through about 1945, shows an obvious influence from Frank Lloyd Wright in residential design; from 1945 through the mid-1950s there's a transitional phase adopting an International Style grammar (curtain walls, *pilotis*) for larger projects; and from the 1960s and 1970s his personal, dramatic style linked to Brutalism for large-scale public buildings. Artigas was one of the main figures of the Paulista School of the 1950s, characterized by expressed reinforced concrete structure.

3.1.2. Artigas's Politics

The greatest figure in Paulista Brutalism is without question Vilanova Artigas, whose Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism was both his place of work and a monument to his ideas. Austere and roughly finished, with the traces of their construction left bare, they were supposed to educate their inhabitants in the value of manual labour. In this way, a villa in an exclusive Sao Paulo suburb could be presented as a revolutionary project, a response to Brazil's condition of poverty.

In Artigas's worldview, certain kinds of construction were of themselves immoral, if, for example, they depended on materials that were scarce or abnormally expensive, or if the building process was unnecessarily labour-intensive. Architecture should be 'universal in content, national in form', he stated.

Artigas developed a distinctive programme of teaching at FAU-USP. Unlike the system in Rio, where architecture had always been based in the school of Fine Arts, in Sao Paulo it was a product of the university's school of engineering. Developing a model from the Bauhaus, Artigas reorganized teaching under three headings – 'history', 'techniques' and 'projects', none of which corresponded to a traditional drawing-based architectural education. A particular concern was the concept of *desenho*, which for Artigas represented an important conceptual problem.

The architect, he argued in 1977, needed to be much more than someone who drew buildings; instead, he should be someone capable of carrying out 'the most varied missions . . . from construction, through photography, and song, to the natural administrative and political roles'. The architect is envisioned here less as an artist than a social engineer.



Figure 2: FAU-USP, São Paulo, 1961–9.

3.1.3. Major works

Artigas's uncompromising political rhetoric achieved material form in most privileged spaces – private villas, sports clubs and university buildings – but their architectural programme can nearly always be read as an illustration of a rhetorical point.

The Casa Elza Berquo in Sao Paulo is a good example of Artigas's principles in built form. The origins of the house are themselves highly political. The Casa Berquo is an ironic commentary on Brazil's modernization: the modernity of its roof is supported by the oldest and crudest of building technologies. The interior, with the trees clearly visible, is full of interesting places to sit and things to look at. It is all done out in the best possible taste. At the same time the roughness of the concrete surfaces, with the traces of the wooden formwork clearly visible, a technique still unfamiliar in a domestic setting.

Allegorical structure can be found at Artigas's building for FAU-USP. This is a very large, reinforced concrete, horizontal pavilion, rising to about four storeys; It is held up by columns of improbable lightness, which suggest the idea that materiality cannot be transcended. But it suggests, a 'strategy' for building in Latin America, combining a simple technology (concrete) with unskilled labour, the latter a resource that Brazil is supposed to have in abundance.

In reality, FAU-USP is as technically sophisticated as any building of the time, with huge spans describing equally huge voids. It is also notoriously expensive to maintain. But it articulates on a large scale the aesthetics of poverty; it looks poor even if in reality it is not.

In all these projects, structure and materials are explicit and very little is concealed. It is obvious how each building is built and with what. The materials are rough and readily available, and the techniques pre-modern or vernacular as much as they are modern. Highly rhetorical formal contrasts: fat concrete roofs balanced on feeble-looking columns or vernacular stonework set against reinforced concrete. Artigas's works look good regardless of their condition, because they seem to have been built as ruins in the first place. The actually ruinous condition of parts of the FAU USP building (its leaky ceiling, for example, dripping with stalactites) seems part of the aesthetic programme rather than a negation of it.

3.2. Lina Bo Bardi, female architect Italian-Brazilian

3.2.1. Life

Lina Bo Bardi (1914-1992) was an incredibly architect and designer who devoted her working life, most of it spent in Brazil, to promoting the social and cultural potential of architecture and design. Bardi was born in Rome and educated at Rome University's College of Architecture. She began her career in Milan, under Gio Ponti. The following year, Bardi was invited to run *Domus* magazine.

Because they had participated in the Italian resistance movement, Lina and her husband, the critic Pietro Bardi, found life in post-war Italy increasingly difficult, and a 1946 trip to Rio de Janeiro convinced the couple to make Brazil their permanent home. Bardi quickly re-established her practice in Brazil and, along with her husband, co-founded the influential art magazine *Habitat*.

Over the next 30 plus years, Bardi would participate in an astonishing number and variety of projects. She designed private homes (both exteriors and interiors), including her own São Paulo home, the Glass House (1951), an early example of the use of reinforced concrete in domestic architecture.



Figure 3: Museu de Arte de Sao Paulo (MASP) 1957 -68



Figure 4: Museu de Arte de Sao Paulo (MASP) 1957 -68

3.2.2. Major works

São Paulo Art Museum (MASP) is perhaps the most famous Brutalist building in São Paulo. The Bo Bardi's contribution to local architecture was both actual and polemical in the 1960s and 1970s through her influence not only as an architect but also as a critic and cultural agent. The MASP is indisputably a landmark, but currently suffers from several unfortunate renovations that have compromised its character.

Bo Bardi's *Museu de Arte de Sao Paulo (MASP)* of 1957–68 occupies four floors on some of the most densely built up and expensive real estate in Brazil. But it manages to occupy space without taking publicly accessible space away from the city. The means of doing this is a remarkable, probably unprecedented structure. The building is split horizontally in the middle, with the two lower floors - a temporary exhibition hall and a restaurant – effectively below ground. These floors support a platform, which forms a covered public square. Above that are two immense pre-stressed concrete beams each 70 meters in length, from which hang two further floors containing the main offices and the galleries of the main collection. The public plaza is, unusually for Brazil, permanently open to the street. Meanwhile, the great Brutalist gallery recedes, to be replaced by what is in effect a children's playground. Where you expect to find sculptures are in fact slides and carousels. Bo Bardi's original treatment of the exhibition spaces continued the theme of public access to culture.

The MASP project materializes a number of crucial ideas in Bo Bardi's thought. MASP remains if nothing else an astonishing form and its programme of public space is one of the most successful in the history of modern architecture. This is a modern space that appears to be both well used and well liked.



Figure 5: SESC-Pompéia, São Paulo, 1977



Figure 6: SESC-Pompéia, São Paulo, 1977

Even more extraordinary is Bo Bardi's last major building, the *Servico Social do Comercio (SESC)- Pompeia (1977–86)*, a publicly funded arts and leisure co-operative in a post-industrial no-man's land. The *SESC* occupies the site of a former brick factory, and reuses a number of low, functional brick structures from it. Bo Bardi described the holes as 'prehistoric', turning the users of the building into temporary cave dwellers. The *SESC* complex became hugely successful, and now contains theatres, gymnasiums, a swimming pool, snack bars, leisure areas, restaurants, galleries, workshops and other kind of services.

3.2.3. Bardi and 'Poor Architecture'

In Brazil Lina Bo Bardi built little, but what she did build was outstanding. Through her drawings, writing and her cultural activity, she made a more complete case than anyone else for an aesthetic of poverty. The two best-known projects both occupy crucial sites in Sao Paulo, and make an appeal to a collective social life, making public space as much a part of the building as concrete or glass.

All Bo Bardi's work was justified in terms of 'poor architecture', which she related to her experience of living in the north-east. Poor architecture, like those things, was the product of a privileged, but sympathetic, imagination: it is not simply touristic in that it does more than merely appropriate poor forms for rich use, as it were; it seeks some kind of engagement with, or identification with, poverty. Children and the poor are for Bo Bardi in effect the same thing, simple, undeveloped, but natural people from whom civilization can and should learn. Ppoor architecture is materially poor yet rich in fantasy and inventions. It is a premise for a free and modern future. Architecture, in other words, that is mostly poor in a poetic sense that holds poverty to be the locus of authentic culture.

3.3. Paulo Mendes da Rocha

3.3.1. Life

Paulo Mendes da Rocha (born October 25, 1928 in Vitória) is a Brazilian architect, honored with the Mies van der Rohe Prize (2000) and the Pritzker Prize (2006).

Working almost exclusively in Brazil, Mendes da Rocha has been producing buildings since 1957, many of them built in concrete, a method some call "Brazilian Brutalism", arguably allowing buildings to be constructed cheaply and quickly.

Few architects describe the changing status of Brazilian Modernism as well as Paulo Mendes da Rocha, who received the Pritzker Prize for architecture in 2006. His has always been architecture for the sake of architecture, 'concrete poetry'. Mendes da Rocha's work represents a way of continuing the Modernist project, but without its ideological baggage.



Figure 7: Casa Leme -Millàn exterior



Figure 8: Casa Leme -Millàn interior

3.3.2. Major works

Brazilian architect Paulo Mendes da Rocha is known for socially responsible architecture that uses simple shapes and minimal resources. Paulo Mendes da Rocha often called a "Brazilian Brutalist" because his buildings are constructed of prefabricated and mass-produced concrete components. Pritzker-prize winning architect da Rocha is known for bold simplicity and an innovative use of concrete.



Figure 9: Brazilian Museum of Sculpture in São Paulo



Figure 10: Brazilian Museum of Sculpture in São Paulo

MUBE (*Museu da Escultura Brasileira / Brazilian Museum of Sculpture*). Since the mid-1980s Mendes da Rocha's work has made the public realm central to his work. *MUBE* was built between 1986 and 1995, and is not really a building at all, but a square on a street corner. The museum is essentially subterranean, set beneath a concrete beam, no less than 60 meters in length and supported only at each end. This is not a space of free expression, but of politeness. It is far less ambitious in concept than the Memorial; it occupies an already privileged space.

Pavilion for the Osaka Expo in Japan. In his extraordinary pavilion for the Osaka Expo in Japan, Mendes da Rocha's pavilion, a great concrete roof resting on the ground on a few incongruously tiny points, reiterates precisely the same design language as that deployed by their teacher, Artigas, in his Fau-Usp building. But where Artigas meant his building as a metaphor for Brazil's under-development, Mendes da Rocha meant only to show off their skill with reinforced concrete. It was an amazing building formally, but no longer communicated an aesthetic of poverty.

4 CONCLUSION

New Brutalism was the product of the search for new ways to produce a more effective architecture that would improve the social and communal realm of the post-war era. Architectural cultures are, after all, international, and tend to have more that unites them than divides them. English Brutalism for the most part is conditioned by a touristic aesthetic. Something of this cultural tourism obtains in Brazil. But it is surprising how much these cultures of Brutalism diverges, how superficially similar buildings such as Artigas's FAU-USP and the buildings of the South Bank Centre in London can represent radically opposing worldviews.

England may have had its own divisions of wealth in the 1950s and '60s, but they were nothing like as extreme as Brazil's, and the topic of poverty nothing like as charged. Perhaps the biggest problem with Brazil's Brutalism was its fundamentally negative relation with its surroundings. In the case of Brazil, the architecture from the outside might be a set of 'blind facades'. But inside, it might bring in some of the 'attributes of the external environment – water, gardens, and sunlight – thus internalizing a sense of the country's natural landscape'.



Figure 11: Southbank Centre, London



Figure 12: Mendes da Rocha Residence, São Paulo

Brutalism in Brazil was a radically introverted architecture, creating often luxurious interior worlds, but at the expense of positive engagement with the world outside. Unlike in England, for the most part it did not become an official style, except for university buildings. Its indifference to the exterior world is perhaps a metonym for the tendency's ideological xenophobia: this was an ideologically, as well as physically, inward-looking architecture. This inwardness contrasts directly with the presentation of Brutalism in Europe, where buildings often make a direct address to their surroundings, and may have decorative or highly modulated exteriors.

For critics like Banham, what was most arresting about Brutalism was the novelty of its relationship with context. Instead of imagining an architecture in which the past had simply been erased, Brutalism assumed that the urban context already existed, but was in a state of ruin. Brutalist architecture overlaid the existing city, interacting with it in sometimes crude, sometimes poetic ways.

For Brutalism in Brazil, to invoke poverty in architecture was to take a step towards the re-education of the political elite; the public spaces that were so prominent a feature of Brutalist architecture were in no sense decorative, but were meant to inculcate new forms of civic association.

The Brazilian work was motivated by a radical politics much more than by style.

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