



## 17 POPULAR MODERNISM: THE BRAZILIAN EXPERIENCE

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### Introduction:

**B**razilian Modern Architecture, although strongly influenced by Corbusier's and the Bauhaus' ideals, achieved a different level of popularity. The outstanding examples of the 1940s and 1950s can be considered a modernist success in terms of popular acceptance. Such acceptance can be perceived in the innumerable elements of Modern Architecture adopted, adapted and applied to middle-class houses in many Brazilian cities during the 1950s and 1960s. In order to frame the analysis of such popular modernism into a broader (international) context, this paper uses Habermas' definition of modernity<sup>1</sup> and Garcia-Canciani's concept of Latin American hybrid modernization<sup>2</sup>. The main goal is to review Brazilian Modern Architecture (especially the later middle-class housing application) in order to discuss, from an architectural perspective, some of the contradictory relationships between modernity, modernism and modernization.

### Modernity and Modernization

Habermas uses the term *modernity* to define the transformations in Western society since the late 18th century. According to Habermas, modernity can be defined by the following characteristics:

1. the "reflective treatment of tradition" or the loss of tradition's quasi-natural status.
2. the "universalization of norms of action".
3. the socialization oriented to the formation of ego-identities.
4. the individual sees his own time as *nova aeras* or new era, in opposition to the previous description of the present as *nostra aerum* or our time.

### Modernism before modernity

If we take Habermas' categories that define modernity, we should say that in terms of Brazil, modernity was, at that time, confined to a very small part of the population if we consider all the manifestations that define it. Habermas is the one that presents the categories that define the rise of modernity, but he is also the one that proposes modernity as an inconclusive project. In addition, both Perry Anderson<sup>3</sup> and Detlev Peukert<sup>4</sup> reinforce the connections between modernism and the inconclusive modernity, suggesting that modernism only arises where modernity is not solved, where the old and the new overlap in an unstable manner<sup>5,6</sup>. Although we can state that modernity, not only in Latin America, has been an inconclusive project, the degree of *inconclusiveness* reinforces the idea of an exuberant modernism with deficient

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**Figure 1** Oscar Niemeyer, Capela da Pampulha, 1942

modernization as the most-reiterated hypothesis in the literature of Latin American modernity.

### Modernism adopted

Modernist ideas arrived late in Brazil. The curricular reformation<sup>7</sup> at ENBA (Escola Nacional de Belas Artes) in 1930 is considered the starting point in architecture, when Lucio Costa was named Director. A few years later, Costa was responsible for inviting Le Corbusier as a supportive consultant for the design for the Ministry of Education (MEC)<sup>8</sup>. The early Brazilian modernist building that appeared just after, a combination of Corbusian volumes with sensual curves, called the attention of the architectural media that celebrated such exuberant modernism.

### Modernism as the paradigm: the Pampulha's buildings

Supported by the Federal Government and adopted by the emerging sectors of the urban society, modernist architecture was spread all around Brazil. In 1941, Oscar Niemeyer was commissioned to design a series of buildings around Pampulha's artificial lake<sup>9</sup>. The designs of *Capela da Pampulha*, *Casa do Baile*, Casino and Yacht Club, became the paradigm for Brazilian Modernism for decades. The *Capela da Pampulha*, presents parabolic vaults covered by little ceramic tiles (*pastilhas*) and the entrance has a horizontal glazing panel under vertical brise-soleils that filters the light to the interior. Also at the entrance, the inclined canopy sustained by two very thin curved steel columns mark the main entrance. The Casino completes the Pampulha complex. Its free-form canopy supported by thin steel columns and the continuous glass wall on the facade would be exhaustively replicated from then on.



**Figure 2** Brazilian modernist house

### The modernist paradigm reaches the middle class

In Brazil the 1950s are known as "Golden Years" due to their promises, optimism and apparently stable democracy and economy<sup>10</sup>. The working middle class grew in terms of political and economical importance and demanded a modern look, or in other words, a modern facade. Thirsty for any modernity, Brazilian households of the 1950s adopted modernism as the fashionable style for their houses. At the periphery of every major Brazilian city, thousands of small houses were built with modernist facades. The vast majority not designed by architects, those houses present modernist elements re-used, re-adapted, re-applied and re-designed. At their facade compositions, one or two major volumes are defined by different roof slopes. The inverted or reverse-slope roof is the most common, and also used on the canopy or the *varanda*. The *varanda* is normally a covered open addition that serves as a transition from public to private space, used on Brazilian architecture to enlarge the area of shading.

On those modernist houses, the canopy plays the role of the *varanda*, enclosed or not. Both the canopies and the thin steel columns used to support it are directly taken from the Pampulha buildings. Also to protect from the sun and increase privacy, brise-soleils are broadly used. Finally, the modernist houses adopted the ceramic tile as a prominent facade material. Used before by the Portuguese houses of the 17th and 18th century, the ceramic tiles were re-discovered by the modernists on the MEC building, and used plentifully on the Pampulha complex. Launched by the construction material industry, ceramic tiles in rich colors were applied profusely on the facade composition, becoming the trademark of this architectural period in addition to the inverted roof, the inclined canopy and the thin steel columns.

### Popular Modernism: Brazilian paradoxical modernity

Given the successful spread and consumption of modernist symbolism in Brazilian housing of the 1950s, such phenomena

may be perceived as successful modernism. What is relevant to discuss from the Brazilian case is the conversion of modern architecture into the predominant aesthetics, its distortions or adaptations and the transformation of modernism into paradigm itself. By doing that it contributed to the formation of a national identity defined in terms of future possibilities, an identity for the *nostra-nova-aerum* (our new time), a combination of modernism, modernity and later modernization. Since modernism does not necessarily imply modernization and is a result of the unstable relation between old and new structures, the simple idea of Latin American exuberant modernism with deficient modernization does not fit into such complex phenomena. The popular response to Brazilian modern architecture is an issue that not only contributes to this discussion but also illuminates its contradictions and fragmented instabilities, like a montage, contradictorily dictating the relation between parts and whole on an image's discourse.



Figure 3 Brazilian modernist house.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Habermas, Junger. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987.
- <sup>2</sup> Garcia-Canclini, Nestor. *Hybrid Cultures; Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1995.
- <sup>3</sup> Anderson, Perry. "Modernity and Revolution", *New Left Review*, 1984
- <sup>4</sup> Peukert, Detlev. *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1991.
- <sup>5</sup> Anderson, Perry. Op cit. 1984.
- <sup>6</sup> Peukert, Detlev, Op cit, 1991.
- <sup>7</sup> Under Costa's direction, Bauhaus' and Corbusier's ideas were adopted in substitution to the previous Beaux-Art-oriented curriculum.
- <sup>8</sup> Working closely with the minister Gustavo Capanema,

Costa was responsible for convincing the minister that the winner design in the 1935 competition for the new Ministry of Education (MEC) building was incompatible with the modern ideas they were trying to establish in Brazil. As an arbitrary response to the frustrating result, the prizes were paid but the winning design was discarded. In its place, following Costa's suggestion, Le Corbusier was invited as a supportive consultant for the team of architects commissioned to design the new building.

- <sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that Belo Horizonte's mayor at that time was Jucelino Kubitschek, later the president that built Brasilia.
- <sup>10</sup> From 1945 to 1960 the country experienced enormous growth and transformations. The major cities doubled every ten years due to industry expansion and farm mechanization.

