

chapter four

The Aesthetics of Poverty

Brasília represents both the chief materialization of the developmentalist ideology in Brazil and its end. As we saw in chapter Three, the realization of the new capital city was accompanied by widespread professional anxiety about both its efficacy as a model and the nature of its imagery. Architectural responses were not slow to arrive – this chapter deals with some of them. The second half of the 1960s was a period of immense political and cultural turmoil in Brazil in which a remarkable number of architects found themselves in direct opposition to the government. Architects often profess radicalism, but act otherwise – their existence, after all, depends on their ability to acquiesce to a client. The situation described in this chapter finds architects, most unusually, matching radical thoughts with actions. The political background to this situation is complex. Juscelino Kubitschek's populist civilian government came to the end of its term in 1961, having achieved the construction of a new capital city, but also an economy with rampant inflation. A flamboyant right-winger, Jânio Quadros, was elected as president that year on an anti-corruption, anti-public spending ticket, only to be replaced in extraordinary circumstances the same year by a leftist, João Goulart. Goulart, always unpopular with the military, was deposed in a right-wing army coup, assisted by the United States, in 1964.¹ The political uncertainty of the early 1960s then gave way to a period of stability and renewed economic growth, with great implications for the appearance of Brazil's big cities. It was this period that saw, for example, São Paulo's Avenida Paulista come into being as a financial centre on a colossal scale: for more on this, see chapter Six. But it was also a period of increasing political repression. Along with all other political parties, the Brazilian Communist Party (PCDOB) was outlawed in mid-1964, and many of its most prominent members were harassed or imprisoned. The profession of architecture came under particular pressure, given that so many of its members (including Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa) were communists, and so much of its contemporary practice was bound up with notions of collective living. Some architects, including for a time Niemeyer, collaborated

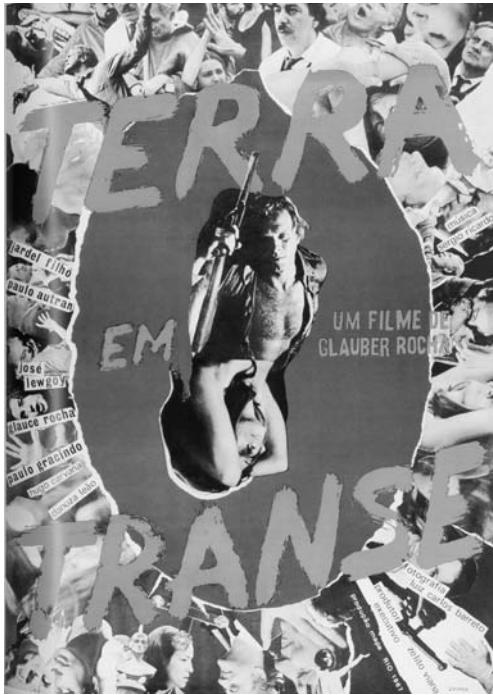
Vilanova Artigas,
FAU-USP, São Paulo,
interior, 1961–9.



Oscar Niemeyer,
Quartel General do
Exército, Brasília,
1968. The shell form
contains the
reviewing stand.

with the military, sometimes in spite of their politics – see, for example, Niemeyer’s Quartel General do Exército (the Army Headquarters) in Brasília, completed in 1968. Others, such as the architects described in this chapter, tried to make their architectural practice into a form of political resistance, developing forms that they believed were, by their very nature, critical of authority. The idea of poverty assumed special importance here, becoming a field of action. For many on the left, architects or not, poverty became something with which to identify.

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, from architecture (Vilanova Artigas, Lina Bo Bardi, Arquitetura Nova) to theatre (Augusto Boal) and education (Paulo Freire). One of the crucial figures in this constellation was the young film director and theorist Glauber Rocha, widely regarded as a genius. His movies were difficult but arresting; shot in black and white on tiny budgets, they dealt with gigantic themes. *Terra em Transe* (Land in Trance) of 1967 is a good example, an uncompromising allegory of contemporary politics in Brazil. Abruptly shot and edited, and acted with peculiar intensity, it actively dispenses with the visual or narrative pleasures of mainstream cinema.² In 1965 Rocha published the article, ‘A Estética da Fome’ (‘The Aesthetics of Hunger’), a short but powerful challenge to the modernizing culture of the authorities.³ It draws attention to the things that the official discourses about Brazil would rather suppress, namely the country’s underdeveloped economy and infrastructure. It also draws attention to those people (namely the poor) that



Glauber Rocha, *Terra em Transe* publicity poster, 1967.

the middle classes most fear. In it, Rocha described how Latin America existed in a colonial relation with the developed world, and how it was perceived by that world as poor or ‘miserable’, a fact that related to its economic condition – but which had also been cultivated by outsiders as part of a general taste for the primitive. This taste was not a result of any sympathy or understanding of actual conditions. If hunger produced for the European a ‘strange tropical surrealism’, which was highly attractive, for the Brazilian it was a ‘national embarrassment’. He ‘doesn’t eat, but is embarrassed to admit it’, wrote Rocha. ‘Above all, he doesn’t know where this hunger comes from.’⁴

The purpose of art in this context should be not to hide hunger or to distract the audience from it by technical or other means such as colour or narrative. Rather, the purpose of art should be to draw the audience’s attention to its actual situation, to make it conscious of its poverty in order that it

should be capable of revolutionary action. The art produced would be both ‘miserable’ and ‘violent’.⁵

Although expressed within the context of film, Rocha’s ideas are important here, since they explain how a culture might develop out of a context of scarcity rather than abundance. They also provide a sharp critique of the developmentalist culture long propagated by the ruling class of whichever political complexion. The impact of this kind of thinking on architecture was considerable. 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 São Paulo (FAU-USP), in large part a response to the circle around Oscar Niemeyer in Rio.⁶ The undoubted leader of the group was Vilanova Artigas (1915–1985), but other important figures included Carlos Millan, Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Fábio Penteadó, Miguel Juliano, Julio Katinsky, Ruy Ohtake and Joaquim Guedes. The Italian-born, naturalized Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi (1914–1992) should also be included here, although she did not constitute part of the social and educational network around Artigas.

The work of these architects adapted and developed ideas expressed in Niemeyer's work, and that of other significant Carioca architects, especially Affonso Reidy, designer of the Pedregulho housing project and the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio. But it also stood in critical relation to it. Its politics were further to the left; it was not often the subject of state patronage; and it had a greater concern for the construction process, both in terms of the materials used and in those doing the building. Its crucial buildings include the FAU-USP itself, designed by Artigas, and Bo Bardi's Museu de Arte de São 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 both Rocha's film theory and the contemporary Italian art movement Arte Povera.⁷

Much of what can be described as the Paulista School has also been described as a local variant of Brutalism. It is a term with a strange history. Brutalism was originally an insult thought up by Gunnar Asplund in Sweden to describe a variant of Modernism that favoured rough, untreated surfaces and a structural aesthetic – an aesthetic in other words quite different from that then favoured in Sweden with its domestic scale, simplicity and shallow-pitched roofs.⁸ Brutalism then migrated to England, where, perversely, it got taken up as a term of approval by an argumentative group associated with the ICA in London, among them Peter and Alison Smithson and the critic Reyner Banham. This group responded to the possibilities suggested by Le Corbusier's recent architecture, in particular the Maisons Jaoul, Paris, and the Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles. What they got from those buildings was an interest in vernacular methods of construction, and *béton brut*. The significant buildings of English Brutalism include the Smithsons' projects for Sheffield and Robin Hood Gardens, and, later, the reconstruction of the South Bank and the Barbican arts centre.

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. The presence of the past in English Brutalism could produce effects that verged on science fiction. For example, Banham described the exhibition *This Is Tomorrow* (in which most of the Brutalists had participated) as 'homely junk excavated after an atomic holocaust'.⁹ The great critic approved – the rough, provisional quality of the work was a form of realism, a coming to terms

with the ruined condition of England immediately after the Second World War. But English Brutalism for the most part is conditioned by a touristic aesthetic. It might look tough, but was mostly appropriating a look in the same way that a sophisticated person might seek out a peasant cottage for a weekend retreat.

Something of this cultural tourism obtains in Brazil. Architectural cultures are, after all, international, and tend to have more that unites them than divides them. But it is surprising how much these cultures of Brutalism diverge, 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. In short, the Brazilian work was motivated by a radical politics much more than by style. For Artigas, to invoke poverty in architecture was to take a step towards the re-education of the political elite; the fortunate few who inhabited his private houses or who worked in his public buildings were in theory an avant-garde who would take the revolution forward. Similarly, the public spaces that were so prominent a feature of Lina Bo Bardi's architecture were in no sense decorative, but were meant to inculcate new forms of civic association: her SESC-Pompéia was, for example, 'a small socialist experiment'.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the two forms of Brutalism have some important things on common. Underlying both is an understanding of the existing built environment as essentially hard, with which an accommodation must be reached. In England, it was the ruined post-war landscape, whose reconstruction would take decades. In Brazil, it was São Paulo, where voracious development had produced strangely similar results. In both cases, there was a tendency towards inward-looking architecture, in which the building turned its back on the public realm and in effect offered a sanctuary from it. In the case of Brazil, as Guilherme Wisnik has described, the architecture from the outside might be a set of 'blind façades'. 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'.¹¹ The peculiar attitude to context is one similarity. Another is a quasi-anthropological desire to preserve poor culture, in England the street life of London's East End, in Brazil the rural culture of the impoverished north-eastern states of Pernambuco and Bahia. Strongly a feature of Bo Bardi's work, it informs the imagination of the public spaces of her buildings.

These ideas have been little discussed in English, perhaps because of the unusual xenophobia of the architectural culture that produced them. The us-aided military coup made the Brazilian left as a result uniquely sensitive about foreign influence. Artigas had long complained

about this, writing in 1953 of the São Paulo Bienal exhibition as simply a vehicle for imperialism. He also complained later about the tendency to discuss his work in the context of European Brutalism, which he thought was just an aesthetic exercise and little to do with his project. The Europeans were Surrealists at heart, he thought – they were interested in unexpected formal juxtapositions, but for aesthetic pleasure or effect.¹² Yet the ideas and buildings discussed here remain of vital importance, representing a corrective to the seductive vision of beaches and bodies of the Carioca school.

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. He was, like Niemeyer, publicly a member of the PCDOB and, after 1964, suffered for it.¹³ Artigas's architecture was underwritten by a xenophobia typical of the PCDOB of the 1950s, but which marks him out from the cosmopolitan Niemeyer. The clearest exposition of this is the polemic of 1951, 'A Bienal é contra os artistas brasileiros' ('The Biennial is against Brazilian Artists').¹⁴ Alert to anything that might be a vehicle for American imperialism, he castigated the São Paulo Bienal, inaugurated in 1951 for representing a 'bourgeois, internationalist' conception of modern art that could only be harmful to Brazilian interests. Artigas went on: he was against 'abstraction' because it served only bourgeois interests. He thought modern art, and by extension modern architecture, no less than 'a weapon of oppression, a weapon of the dominant class, a weapon of the oppressors against the oppressed'. Cities run by the *bourgeoisie* were 'chaos'; books about urbanism were little more than 'a walk through slum tenements'. Invoking Friedrich Engels's work on nineteenth-century Manchester, he argued that planning was a sham, just a bourgeois attempt to hide the misery of the poor.¹⁵

At the same time as he criticized the US and its perceived imperialism, he enthused about the USSR's urban policies. It had, he claimed in his essay of 1952, 'Os caminhos da arquitetura moderna' ('The Paths of Modern Architecture'), produced 350 new cities in twenty years, and a Moscow 'as luxurious as New York'.¹⁶ There were no slums in the USSR, he wrote, yet the *bourgeoisie* in the West attacked the USSR in the name of aesthetics:

in the name of modern art, whose fundamental mission as we have seen has been to attack the working class and keep them in a state of

misery . . . in the name of this great mystification they attack communist architecture for being 'academic' because some of the buildings are built with columns, with balustrades, with cornices. Really they want to attack socialism and the proletarian revolution.¹⁷

Yet the Brazilian Communist Party, to which Artigas belonged, did not believe in working directly with or for the working class. Following Engels's century-old argument, the PCDOB held that to build for the proletariat was incorrect, since to make it more comfortable in its present circumstances lessened the chances of revolution. Instead, the PCDOB advocated revolution via a re-educated *bourgeoisie*. Artigas's villas, all built for a wealthy clientele, were meant to participate in this process. 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 São 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. It was better to make use of whatever materials and techniques naturally abounded, and whose deployment was least likely to exploit those involved.

Artigas's xenophobia meant that he even regretted the influence of Le Corbusier in Brazil, describing him once as an 'imperialist . . . an ideologue of the ruling class, a fearless defender of the bourgeois order'.¹⁸ Foreign influences were to be minimized, he argued, since Brazil was an exceptional case. Only Brazilians could understand the subtleties of their own situation, particularly its mechanisms of exploitation, and foreign influence meant the likelihood of American domination. But Artigas could argue for an internationalism of a different kind, drawing on his admiration for the Soviet experience. Architecture should be 'universal in content, national in form', he stated. He discussed the need for the 'decolonization of conscience' of architects, rather than banning outside influence.¹⁹ Artigas's xenophobia was therefore qualified. It rejected the bastardized International Style that was coming to define the commercial buildings of São Paulo, since the adoption of this American style (with limited resources) served only to underline Brazil's peripheral and impoverished condition.

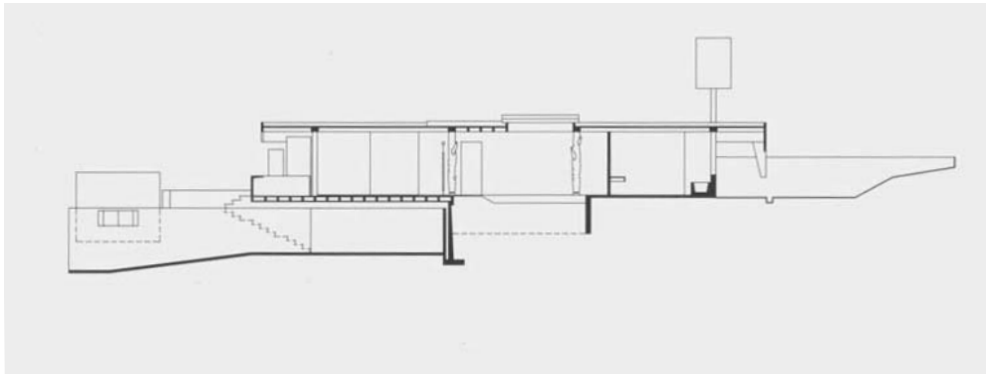
Artigas developed a distinctive programme of teaching at FAU-USP. Unlike the system in Rio, where architecture had always been based in the school of Fine Arts (of which Lúcio Costa had been briefly head), in São Paulo it was a product of the university's school of engineering.

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. In English it translates as both ‘design’ and ‘drawing’, the former meaning carrying conceptual weight lacking in the latter. Artigas’s use of the word *desenho* has something of this English meaning – he wanted to orient the practice of architecture away from the visual and towards a practice with greater organizational ambitions, and specifically the capacity to reorganize society. 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. As Hugo Segawa has described, the architect in this scheme became a ‘redeemer’, a ‘missionary’, whose aim was to ‘reformulate the world’.²⁰

The Architecture of the Paulista School

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. Interiors were kept as open as possible, in which (as Hugo Segawa has described) ‘traditional hierarchies of use and sociality’ were abolished, so that ‘shared spaces were elevated in importance, while private areas were kept as compact as possible’.²¹ There was also superficially less emphasis on luxury – these were tough and uncompromising spaces that made a point of revealing the amount of labour that had gone into their construction.²²

The Casa Elza Berquó in São Paulo (1967) is a good example of Artigas’s principles in built form. The origins of the house are themselves highly political. The military coup of 1964 landed Artigas in prison as a security risk, and although he was released after twelve days, he remained under suspicion by the authorities until 1966 when all charges against him were dropped. It was during this period of surveillance that he was offered the commission by Berquó and her husband Rubens Murilo Marques, both academics at the University of São Paulo. She was evidently an understanding client. When Artigas enquired if she was sure – did she really want him to design a house from his cell? – Berquó replied that she was quite happy to take him on as ‘architect-prisoner’.²³ In the end, Artigas stayed out of jail, and the house was built as planned.



Vilanova Artigas,
Casa Elza Berquó,
São Paulo, 1967,
sketch.

The house nevertheless has allegorical aspects that refer directly to its origins. The house itself comprises a concrete box, held up by nothing more than four tree trunks. Internally, a hole is cut in the roof allowing light to penetrate. In this light-filled space, defined horizontally by the four trunks, a small tropical garden flourishes. The weight of the roof and the unlikeliness of the trunks produced an allegorical contrast. Artigas's choice of deliberately poor materials to support the house's most fundamental structure was an ironic commentary on Brazil's development. He stated:

this technology of reinforced concrete, which allows this splendid architecture to be made, is no more than an incurable stupidity in respect of the contemporary political situation.²⁴

The Casa Berquó is an ironic commentary on Brazil's modernization: the modernity of its roof is supported by the oldest and crudest of building technologies, as if to say that Brazil's own modernity is no more than superficial, and that it is likely to collapse at any moment.²⁵ Aspects of this house, as contemporary photographs of it make clear, speak of a life of some luxury. It occupies a secluded plot, surrounded by the high fences and enormous trees typical of a high-end São Paulo suburb. The view of the rear of the house shows its cantilevered roof jutting out over a beautiful pool, like a tiled version of a Color Field painting, while the casually arranged tables and chairs suggest a languid sociability. 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 higher-resolution images show the roughness of the concrete surfaces, with the traces of the wooden formwork clearly visible, a technique still unfamiliar in a domestic setting. Around the





Vilanova Artigas,
Casa Elza Berquó,
São Paulo, 1967,
interior.

roof, great concrete panels hang down in a scarcely credible manner, like concrete curtains. Overall, the house has the precariousness of a tent – it is little more than a concrete canopy held up by sticks, and at ground level the interior and exterior spaces blur, rhetorically and in actuality, into each other.

A much larger instance of the same allegorical structure can be found at Artigas's building for FAU-USP of 1961–9. This is a very large, reinforced concrete, horizontal pavilion, rising to about four storeys; the surfaces are again exceptionally rough. It has a massive, light-filled atrium covered with glass, and it is open to the elements at ground level. It is held up by columns of improbable lightness, which suggest the idea that materiality cannot be transcended. They taper in the middle, creating an apparent structural weakness. Not only that but the upper storeys of the building are rhetorically exaggerated in mass. Windowless, they cantilever out all around the building, as if more than half of this already massive structure rests on these comically insufficient stalks. It looks as if it has a duty to fall down. But it suggests, as Adrian Forty has written, a 'strategy' for building in Latin America, combining a simple technology

Vilanova Artigas,
Casa Elza Berquó,
São Paulo, 1967.



Vilanova Artigas,
FAU-USP, São Paulo,
1961–9.

Vilanova Artigas,
FAU-USP, São Paulo,
detail, 1961–9.

aesthetics of poverty Artigas

(concrete) with unskilled labour, the latter a resource that Brazil is supposed to have in abundance.²⁶

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; an allegory of underdevelopment informed by Marxist political beliefs, it *looks* poor even if in reality it is not. Unlike Niemeyer's Modernism, its intent is desublimatory. It does not, in other words, seek to lift one out of the everyday world, to achieve a sense of the Surrealist *merveilleux* or have any other transcendent experience. Quite the reverse: it seeks to bring one down to earth, to remind one of the limits of everyday existence, and in so doing suggest more realistic ways of living.

Other projects by Artigas worth citing include the Taques Bittencourt house (1959) in São Paulo for its formwork imprints and stone wall; the dressing rooms for the São Paulo football club (1961) for an astonishingly rough concrete finish; the Santa Paula yacht club in São Paulo the same year, for a great concrete roof teetering on inverted triangular columns (a sketch for the later FAU-USP); the Zezinho Magalhães public housing project at Guarulhos, close to São Paulo's international airport (1967); and the Jaú bus station (1973). 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. And there are, as is so striking at FAU-USP, highly rhetorical formal contrasts: fat concrete roofs balanced on feeble-looking columns or vernacular stonework set against reinforced concrete. The same formal sensibility can be found in several other architects of the Paulista school: Joaquim Guedes, Fábio Penteadó, Ruy Ohtake and Paulo Mendes da Rocha. The work of the Curitiba-born João Filgueiras Lima (Lelé) is important in terms of its continuation of the Modern Movement as an ideological project rather than a stylistic one. His administrative centre for Salvador (1974–5) makes use of prefabricated elements on a massive scale through which the landscape penetrates.

For some of his followers, however, the radical potential of Artigas's work was curtailed by the nature of his patronage (see chapter Five). I have already shown how Artigas's affiliation to the PCDOB's line on proletarian revolution allowed him to concentrate on high-class housing for select clients. The emphasis on the re-education of the wealthy now seems perverse, a deferral at best, while the precise nature of this 're-education' remains obscure. Nowhere is it made clear how living in surroundings of *béton brut* and tree trunks may inform a revolutionary attitude. Whatever revolutionary sentiments these buildings were supposed to

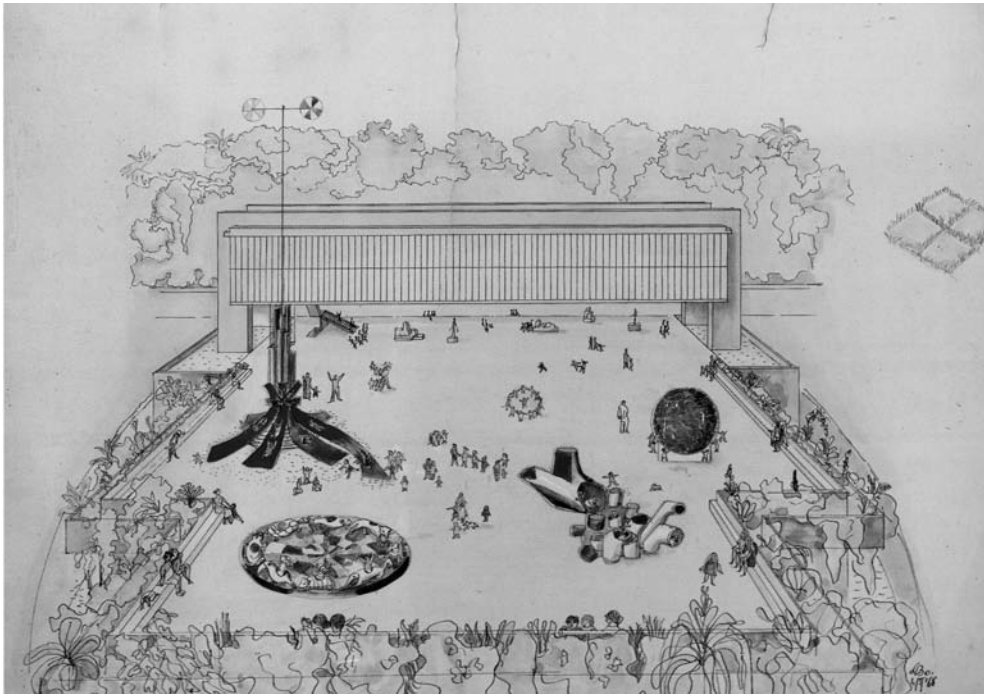
produce are ameliorated by soft furnishings and luxuriant vegetation. In any case, in Brazil as everywhere, revealing the frankness of the building process is no guarantor of sympathy with those who laboured in the building. As a revolutionary tool, Artigas's work remains obscure.

What can be said about it with certainty, however, is that it supplies a critique of the developmentalist aesthetic of the Carioca school. Paulista buildings *age*. Artigas's works look good regardless of their condition, because they seem to have been built as ruins in the first place. That of Reidy, by contrast, or Niemeyer needs constant attention to maintain an illusion of newness. 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. The appalling physical state of Reidy's Pedregulho by contrast seems only to indicate its failure.

Bo Bardi and 'Poor Architecture'

Such ideas were pushed to their limit in the work of Lina Bo Bardi, an Italian-born naturalized Brazilian, who had trained and worked in Italy in the office of Gio Ponti, and amongst other things documented the ruined condition of Italy's cities after the war. Her own office had been destroyed in an air raid in 1943. In Brazil she built little, but what she did build was outstanding. She was also the founder and first editor of the design magazine *Habitat* (1949–53), highly regarded outside Brazil, as well as the creator of the Museum of Popular Art of Bahia.²⁷ 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 São Paulo, and make an appeal to a collective social life, making public space as much a part of the building as concrete or glass.

Bo Bardi's Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP) of 1957–68 sits opposite the Parque Trianon, midway along Avenida Paulista, then the financial heart of the city. With the exception of the park, it is an area that conspicuously lacks public space. One is either inside a building or part of the traffic of the avenue, symptomatic of an exclusionary system that, consciously or not, divides the worlds of work and non-work, wealth and poverty. The one big exception to this is the MASP. It 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



Lina Bo Bardi, MASP, São Paulo, sketch, 1968.

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 metres 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. The huge span of the beams means it is unobstructed, although it is mostly shaded by the upper floors of the museum, no bad thing given the summer climate in the city. The plaza extends to the rear of the building, providing views of the city to the north. In a particularly hard urban environment, with few areas of public space, the MASP is, and has always been, well used throughout the day. Aldo Van Eyck wrote after its construction that it was ‘an amazing feat for the building is indeed both there and not there, giving back to the city as much space as it took from it. An impossible site if ever there was one – all the more so because it was destined to remain open – not built on.’²⁸

Bo Bardi’s sketches of MASP before its completion show the sublimation of this public space. In one sketch done on 4 May 1965 in a *faux-naïf* style, the plaza is depicted from the north, and is shown surrounded by



Lina Bo Bardi, MASP,
São Paulo, under
construction, 1968.



Three further views of
Lina Bo Bardi's MASP,
São Paulo.



Lina Bo Bardi, MASP, São Paulo, 1968, with an anti-corruption protest, c. 1992.



vegetation; the strip of planting around its edges appears continuous with the Parque Trianon on the south side of 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. She wrote:

The new museums should open their doors and let pure air and new light in . . . it is in this new social sense that the MASP was conceived and directed specifically at uninformed, unintellectual, unprepared masses.²⁹

The original concept for the exhibition spaces had the painting collection displayed on glass stands in the centre of the space; the usual arrangement of walls and partitions and the accompanying linear progression through museum space was abolished. At the same time, the uninterrupted curtain walls of the east and west fronts of the museum suggested the interpenetration of inside and outside spaces, as if the collection and its surroundings were no longer to be considered separate from each other, or the one valued any higher than the other. The effect was reminiscent of the famous image of André Malraux, de Gaulle's minister of culture, contemplating a vast, de-hierarchized array of photographs of sculpture for his book *Le Musée imaginaire*, a book Bo Bardi undoubtedly knew.³⁰ Bo Bardi herself wrote of her antipathy to



Lina Bo Bardi,
MASP, São Paulo,
interior with original
arrangement of
pictures, 1968.

traditional arrangements for viewing art: in the new setting ‘pictures and public are liberated and free’; viewing pictures becomes a matter of choosing a dance partner; one approaches the work of art in the same way one chooses a dancing partner, as a meeting of equals rather than one in which one party has the upper hand.³¹

The MASP project materializes a number of crucial ideas in Bo Bardi’s thought. As an Italian immigrant, she had a formative experience between 1958 and 1963 living in Salvador in the north-eastern state of Bahia, one of the poorest of Brazil’s cities and one with the highest Afro-Brazilian population. Partly as a result of that experience, she came to regard Brazil as essentially a childlike nation, undeveloped and naïve by First World standards, but strong in this essential character.³² Crucial terms in Bo Bardi’s

thought were 'happy', 'pretty', 'simple' and 'poor'. Her language now seems patronizing and neo-colonial. But equally, in using words like these she empathized with a version of Brazil normally kept from view by the authorities, except in carefully controlled circumstances. Her Bahia museum of popular art was thought subversive by the military, which occupied and closed it in 1964, and forced her to resign as director; she spent much of the subsequent decade away from both Brazil and architecture. At the same time her identification with the poor seemed to have something of the same exoticizing character seen in (for example) the 1959 movie *Black Orpheus* by Marcel Camus, a version of the Orpheus myth set in a Rio *favela*. Like Camus, Bo Bardi seemed to wish to keep Brazil in a state of attractive underdevelopment, perhaps because she herself had ways of escaping it. Her houses, such as the house built for herself and her husband Pietro in the luxuriant suburb of Morumbi that now houses her archive – are sophisticated exercises in a rustic modern style, calculatedly rough weekend houses for a client base that had enough wealth and sophistication to enjoy a bit of austerity.

These reservations apart, 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. Like the Place Beaubourg in Paris or the Rockefeller Center in New York, this is a modern space that appears to be both well used and well liked. Even more extraordinary is Bo Bardi's last major building, the Serviço Social do Comércio (SESC)-Pompéia (1977–86), a publicly funded arts and leisure co-operative in a post-industrial no-man's land. To describe the SESC as a leisure centre suggests something prosaic and functional, when it is neither. It is enormous, first of all – 16,500 square metres – the size of a large office

building. It is by conventional standards perhaps the ugliest building in this book, deeply inelegant, awkward and brutally finished, with no apparent relation to its surroundings. This was all apparently intentional: Bo Bardi declared that she wanted the SESC to be 'even uglier than the MASP'.³³ But an extraordinary range of activities are possible in the centre, from theatre and art exhibitions to ceramics and metal-work classes to film, to swimming to aerobics. There are two swimming pools, a gym and a very cheap (and good) restaurant.

Lina Bo Bardi,
SESC-Pompéia: site
as factory before
construction.



But the most remarkable features are formal. The SESC occupies the site of a former brick factory, and reuses a number of low, functional brick structures from it. Then there are two towers housing the sports facilities. One deliberately recalls the demolished factory chimney, and has a crude construction in thick bands of concrete visible from afar – if anything, it looks cruder than the simple industrial structure to which it alludes. Bo Bardi wrote that its detailed design was left to the builders who themselves developed the look of the final structure, defined by plywood formwork sliding up the tower to provide room for 56 piled rings, each 1 metre in height. The cotton waste on the external face was used as a sealing element during the concreting phase and moulded the final lace effect of the surface.³⁴

The other tower, containing swimming pools and other sports facilities, is a big cuboid of the same height as the water tower, and is characterized by strange irregularly shaped holes covered with metal grilles. These were made to provide natural ventilation, replacing the need for air conditioning, a technology that generally horrified the architect. Bo Bardi described the holes as ‘prehistoric’, turning the users of the building into temporary cave-dwellers.³⁵ The sympathetic Catalan critic Eduardo Subirats has referred to the building’s aesthetic of play, turning a space of work into a space of leisure. The original site was a site of hard manual labour, transformed into a space of creativity and relaxation. Subirats relates this explicitly to notions of poverty (see Rocha, cited at the outset) and to Johann Huizinga’s notions of creativity and play from *Homo Ludens*, still fashionable on the libertarian left.³⁶ Subirats and others therefore describe the SESC as a poetic transformation first and foremost, rather than one driven – as it would have been in the US – by a rational imperative, however superficial. Subirats defines the SESC as such:

It’s a model of poetic intervention in a real situation . . . it defines a specific sense of civilizing architecture through the dignification of human life, through the active participation in collective processes of artistic communication, of the collective management of knowledge, of the collective creation of a collective identity.³⁷

All Bo Bardi’s work was justified in terms of ‘poor architecture’, which she related to her experience of living in the north-east:

I was looking for simple architecture, one that could immediately communicate that which in the past was known as ‘monumental’. . . I made the most of my 5 years in the northeast of Brazil, a lesson

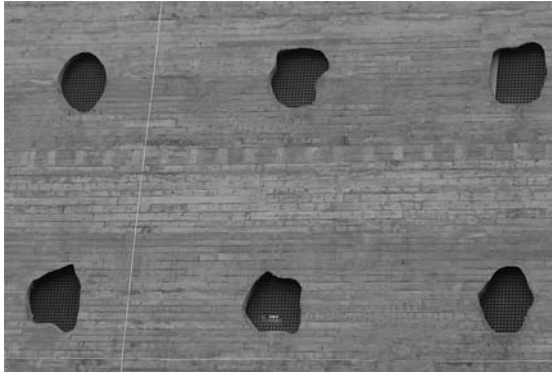


Lina Bo Bardi,
SESC-Pompéia,
São Paulo, 1977.
Concrete walkways
linking the towers.



of popular experience, not as folkloric romanticism but as an experiment in simplification. By means of a popular experiment I arrived at what might be called Poor Architecture.³⁸

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. Bo Bardi's perspective sketches of MASP, for example, do not for the most part represent the typical visitors to a museum complex, the wealthy and the privileged; instead, she represents children, a section of society that she rhetorically blurs with the poor; children and the poor are for Bo Bardi in effect the same thing, simple, undeveloped, but natural people from



Lina Bo Bardi,
SESC-Pompéia, São
Paulo, detail, 1977.
'Prehistoric' holes.

whom civilization can and should learn. According to Roberto Conduru, poor architecture is materially poor 'yet rich in fantasy and inventions. It is a premise for a free and modern future that, together with the achievements of the most scientific practice, will retain at the beginning of a new civilization the values of a history full of hardships and poetry.'³⁹ An architecture, in other words, that is mostly poor in a poetic sense, that holds poverty to be the locus of authentic culture. As soci-

ety progresses, and becomes materially richer and more sophisticated, it has a moral obligation to remind itself of its origins. Something of this can be seen in the SESC-Pompéia, a building that symbolically exists outside modern time. In its harsh, but unmistakably modern, surroundings, its history is hard to disentangle. The new bits of the building in some ways look older than the refurbished old bits; like a castle or keep, the main tower might be medieval. Its strange window openings at first sight look as if they may be evidence of decay, and as the architect makes clear, they are technically a means of denying the rich world.⁴⁰ The SESC-Pompéia takes the logic of Artigas's work as far as it may conceivably go in a monumental building. This is some achievement, and as virtually all critics are agreed, it supplies a set of remarkable, unique spatial experiences. But at the same time, it could not supply a model for mass housing as its author really wanted: it was far too individual and irrational for that.

After Brutalism

From outside of Brazil, it is tempting to regard the indigenous form of Brutalism as something of a dead end. Unlike in England, for the most part it did not become an official style, except for university buildings. It enjoyed occasional patronage from individual states, but not from the federal government. There is very little in Brasília that could be regarded as Brutalist, hardly a surprise given the calculated opulence of most of the capital's official architecture; its rhetoric of poverty was too uneasy, too critical to make much sense for any but a few buildings, and least of all public housing. 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



Vilanova Artigas,
bus station, Jaú, 1973.

relation with its surroundings. As Wisnik has written, Brutalism in Brazil was a radically introverted architecture, creating often luxurious interior worlds, but at the expense of positive engagement with the world outside. This was an understandable response to the urban condition of São Paulo, but it made for an architecture that could stand only in critical relation to its surroundings.⁴¹ 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 (contrary to much popular opinion) buildings often make a direct address to their surroundings, and may have decorative or highly modulated exteriors.

There are, however, at least three ways in which the project of Brutalism, and its accompanying aesthetic of poverty, were continued into the 1970s and beyond. First are the vault-house experiments of the *Arquitetura Nova* group. Discussed in more detail in the following chapter, this group took up and extended the political language of their teacher, Artigas, developing a set of architectural principles and methods that, they argued, could be applied on a large scale and in a popular context. They attempted to move Brutalism beyond the provision of bespoke buildings for sophisticated clients. Second was the work of the



architect João Filgueiras Lima (Lelé), whose work carried on the project of Brutalism as a political project in large-scale public commissions, including a series of well-known and well-liked special hospitals. The Hospital Sarah Kubitschek (1980) on the Avenida W3 in Brasília is a good example, a building organized around unstinted spaces for the patients' benefit, exemplified in a set of generous balconies. Third is the success of Paulo Mendes da Rocha, recipient of the Pritzker Prize in 2006. Mendes da Rocha's more recent work is discussed in chapter Eight. But what is clear as early as 1970, and his extraordinary pavilion (built with Ruy Ohtake) for the Osaka Expo in Japan, is that Paulista Brutalism could be reconfigured as a formal spectacle, stripped of any political meaning it once had. That pavilion, a great concrete roof resting on the ground on a few



Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Expo '70 Pavilion, Osaka.

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 and Ohtake meant only to show off their skill with reinforced concrete. It was an amazing building formally, but no longer communicated an aesthetic of poverty.

João Filgueiras Lima (Lelé), Hospital Sarah Kubitschek, Brasília, 1980.

Hospital Sarah Kubitschek, detail.

