

## Practicus Delirium: The Tropical Interdisciplinarity Of Lina Bo Bardi

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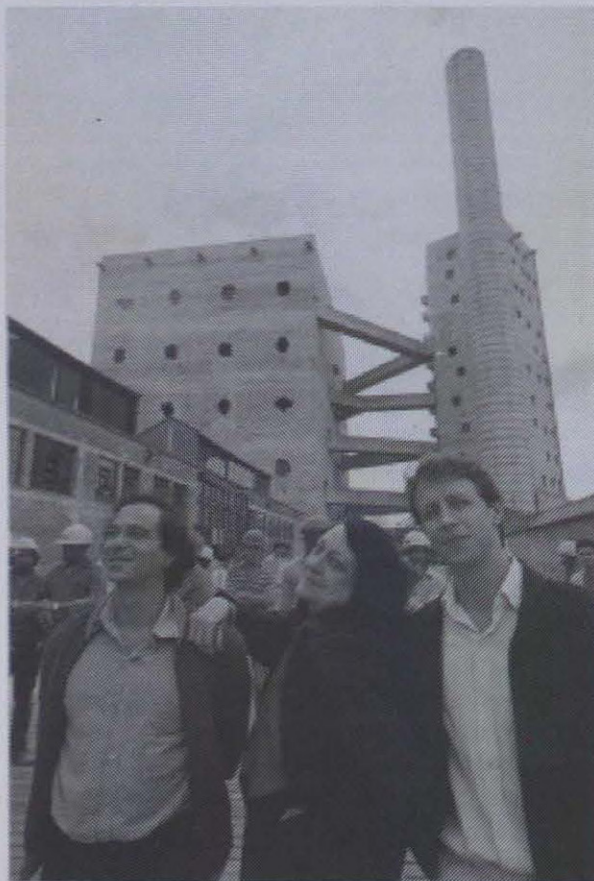


Fig. 1. André Vainier, Lina , Marcelo Carvalho Ferraz in front of the SESC-Pompéia Factory.

After presentations in São Paulo, several countries in Europe, and a first North American stop in Chicago, the exhibition of Lina Bo Bardi arrived at the Centre de Design de l'Université du Québec à Montréal (May 29-September 14, 1997). It was a unique opportunity to encounter the work of this significant post-war Brazilian architect. The pioneering retrospective of a Brazilian architect in Canada, the show invited a closer dialogue between these two American peoples, who have in common their elaborate cultures and their vast and peripheral landscapes. It created the opportunity to enlarge discussions of post-colonial issues, and to embrace the particular circumstances through which the modern project was assimilated. The exhibition presented drawings, photographs, models, artifacts, furniture and a video documenting the facets of an extraordinary artist whose work in Brazil evolved for almost fifty years.

The exhibition was didactically divided into seven sectors: Space and Sociability, The Theatrical Space, The Object and its Image, The House, Ways of Exhibiting, Recuperation-Restoration, and Graphic Communication. The sensible and highly evolved arrangement of the show by Georges Labrecque and a group of young designers rendered an eloquent environment, acutely suitable to experience the idiosyncratic work of Lina Bo Bardi. The theatricality encountered in Lina's production was replicated here through the juxtaposition of two distinct walls: a transparent coroplast plane suggested the theme of technological exploration; and a used construction wood wall, into which was inserted a full-scale silhouette from an organic-shaped window of the Sesc-Pompéia factory (fig. 1), evoked the employment of local materials and shapes. Models were placed on the existing bright red transportation crates, and the furniture on used wooden palettes.

It is impossible to begin a reflection on the work of Lina Bo Bardi without first referring to the time of my own education as an architect during the early 1980s in Brazil. The popular political struggle of that time called for the return of the democratic model and the dismissal of the military regime. This movement culminated in the passionate social urge to uncover the political, intellectual, and cultural repression of the previous twenty years: a demand for a rectification of recent history. Surprisingly, even with the ardent efforts of the intelligentsia, that history was not entirely uncovered. Placed as an outcast, Lina Bo Bardi was subtly skipped from our history courses at the



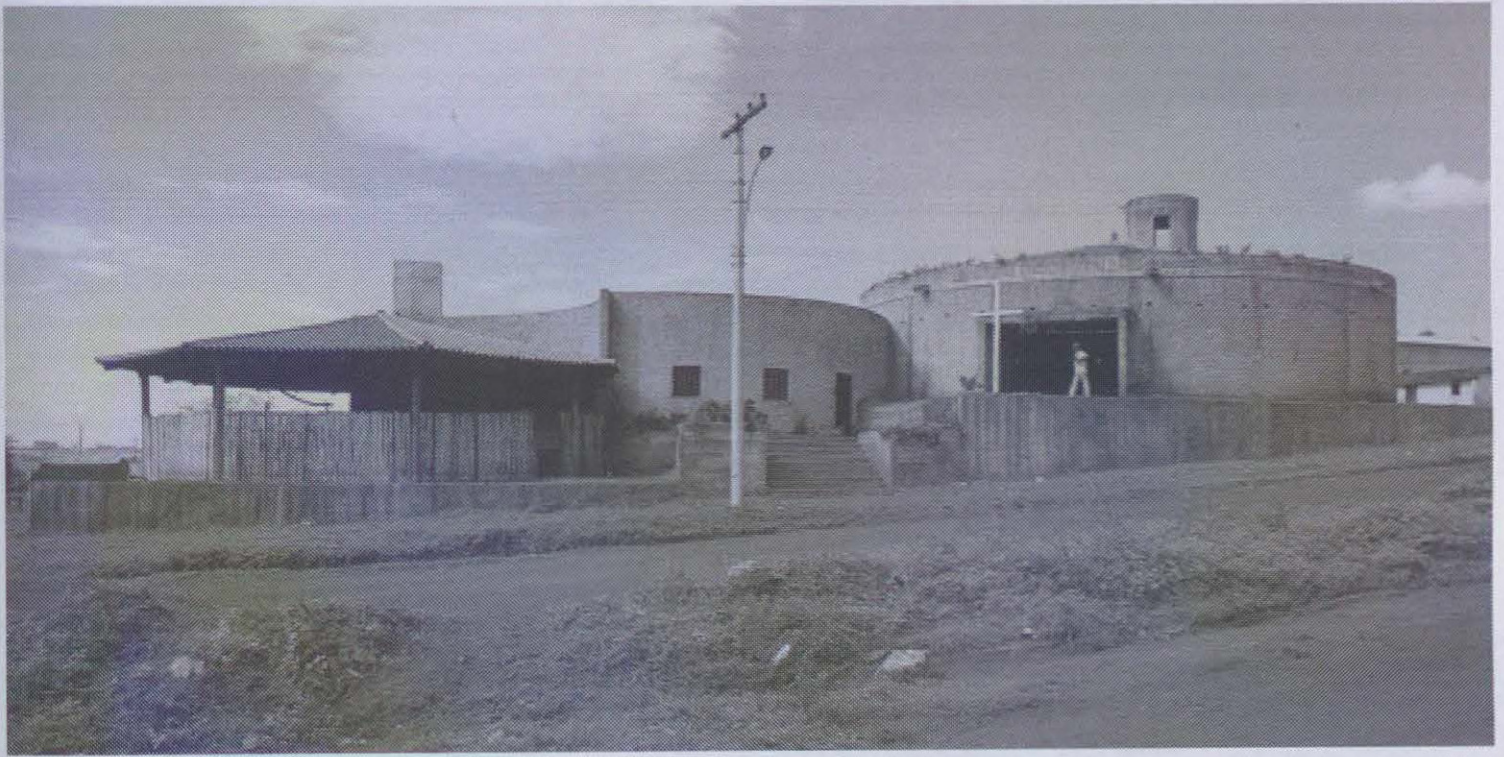


Fig. 2.



school of architecture. At that time, the nostalgic attempt to revive the golden age of Brazilian modern architecture expelled Lina's work from the critical forum which exclusively supported the ever-praised dichotomy of São Paulo's rational brutalism and Rio de Janeiro's plastic-sensual archetype.

At that time, São Paulo was experiencing with the expansion of a language that would consider technique as the poetic mark in the formation of a local architectural expression. The Paulista architects considered these two essential components, technique and poetry, as a single, united architectural entity.<sup>1</sup> Rio's architectural character, in contrast, was more visual, flamboyant and graceful. In Rio, architecture was fundamentally inspired by Rio's glamorous cityscape: placed between the mountains with their exuberant tropical forest and the open sea, architecture was contemplated as a reinterpretation of the landscape itself, or, in its curvilinear, Junoesque character, as inspired by "the curves of the sensual Brazilian woman," as Niemeyer constantly remarked.

Both the Paulista and the Carioca schools were profoundly influenced by the rationalism of Le Corbusier (Oscar Niemeyer in Rio) and Frank Lloyd Wright (Villanova Artigas in São Paulo). What made Brazilian architecture known internationally, however, was its powerful capacity to find local interpretations of these two significant foreign architects, especially through advanced experiments in the use of reinforced concrete research, one of the most appropriate construction techniques for tropical and sub-tropical climates.<sup>2</sup> The opposition of the two schools was encouraged by the international recognition the Carioca group instantly received after Le Corbusier's participation in the Ministry of Education building in Rio de Janeiro in 1936, and the later realization of Brasília by Rio's Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer (1957-60). Because it is visually more eloquent, and thus favors the creation of a "national image," Carioca architecture has an advantage over Paulista: it is more easily accepted by the foreign eye. The popular acclaim received by the Rio de Janeiro group, however, does not in anyway shadow the crucial contribution of the Paulista group.

Lina's architecture, on the other hand, as the whole of her practice, was too intricate a production to be easily placed in any tradition. She has baffled critics who cannot find the formal cohesion usually encountered in architects of her generation. Her architecture responded to people's immediate needs and

cultural inclinations more than to conventional impositions of the International Style or the local post-Brasília paradigm. She courageously challenged all the rules and norms to create a powerful vision of a better society. A chameleonic presence, Lina absorbed lessons both from Modernism and from local techniques and practices, combining them in response to each encountered situation, learning from the specific setting rather than simply applying a personal and formalist agenda. For Lina, architecture was more than a medium for individual expression: it was a way of living, a method for social interaction, a political tool for change, an anthropological *modus operandi*. Thus if one contrasts the rough curves of the Espírito Santo do Cerrado Church (1976-82; fig. 2) with the pure elegance and sophisticated engineering of the São Paulo Art Museum (1957-68; fig. 3), one wonders about the wide, free spaces that exist in between these two apparently opposed expressions.

Lina Bo Bardi emerged as one of the most significant architects of the second wave of Brazilian Modernism, along with Affonso Eduardo Reidy, Rino Levi, Villanova Artigas, and more recently Paulo Mendes da Rocha. Prior to her arrival in Brazil from Italy, she was a collaborator with Gio Ponti as an editor of *Domus* magazine. Associating with the local vanguards almost immediately upon her arrival from Europe after the 1939-45 war, Lina created a body of work of extreme pertinence to architectural culture both in Brazil and internationally. Together with her husband and long-term partner Pietro Maria Bardi, she was a founding member of the first modern art museum in Brazil, a collector of popular art, and an educator. They formed a team that deeply influenced the character of design, visual arts and architecture in Brazil for more than half a century, leaving an indelible contribution to modernity in Latin America. Her research with native materials, craftsmanship, techniques and aesthetics advanced the understanding, preservation and respect of popular cultures. Her critical distance, her European view of regional and popular manifestations led her to a very pungent, mature language, crisscrossing diverse low and high cultural trends and techniques.

For younger architects Lina Bo Bardi represents more and more a real possibility for optimism and change. Lina precociously advanced notions of interdisciplinarity, multiculturalism, and diversity, so prevalent today. An explorer beyond cultural, linguistic, and geographic borders, she embraced the con-



traditions of Brazil and its people, translating into many diverse media a voracious heterogeneity and syncretism, all of this in a time when artistic "purism" was in vogue. Little wonder it was so difficult to include her work in the critical discussions of the period.

A renaissance woman, Lina was never totally comfortable within the borders of the architectural scene in Brazil, and naturally engaged in the broader artistic milieux of theatre, popular music, popular regional arts, visual arts, and cinema. Her close proximity to the diversified character of that sizzling period of Brazilian culture created a natural distance from the isolated architectural debate, which was still marked by duality and division, a certain paralysis left after the the architecture boom of the 1950s and early 1960s. Her intuitive interdisciplinary strategies, constantly challenging traditional notions of architectural practice, were encouraged by the freedom she felt among these different groups. As a consequence, Lina's activities as an architect expanded toward theater and film set design, costume, exhibition, industrial and furniture design. Interdisciplinarity was a constant in her practice. It was not solely expressed through her poetic openness as a complete artist, moving freely from medium to medium, but most importantly it was represented through the intrinsic, inner development of her projects. In her decision-making process, she brought together the knowledge of the people working around her in their full expressiveness, without disregarding normative architectural criteria.

Fifó, a burntout incandescent bulb ingeniously transformed into a new kerosene lamp, illustrates well this interdisciplinary approach, showing at the same time the simplicity and complexity of her operations (fig. 4). Here, she turns a light bulb's function upside down, and flips it over again to recreate a utility which was already there in the first place, that is, a device to produce light. By constantly challenging the conservative rhetoric that developed during the dictatorial post-Brasília period, Lina opened the possibilities of experimentation, presenting us with an oeuvre of eloquent contemporary freshness.

The diversity encountered in Lina's work places notions of contextuality into a fresh perspective. Contextualism, viewed from the vantage point of the architectural practice, has traditionally been related to site constraints, landscape characteristics, specific urban dispositions, choices of material, etc.



Fig. 3.

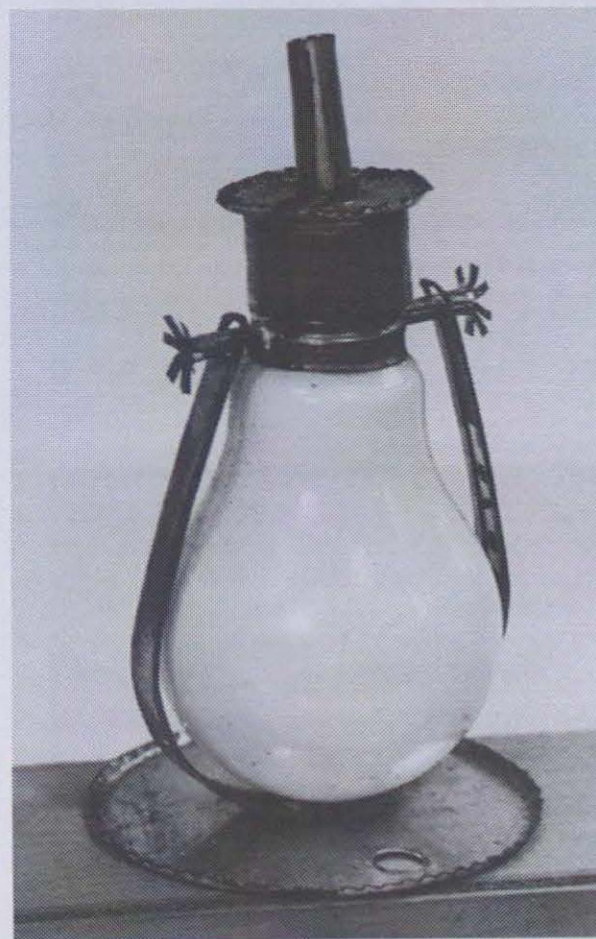


Fig. 4.





Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.

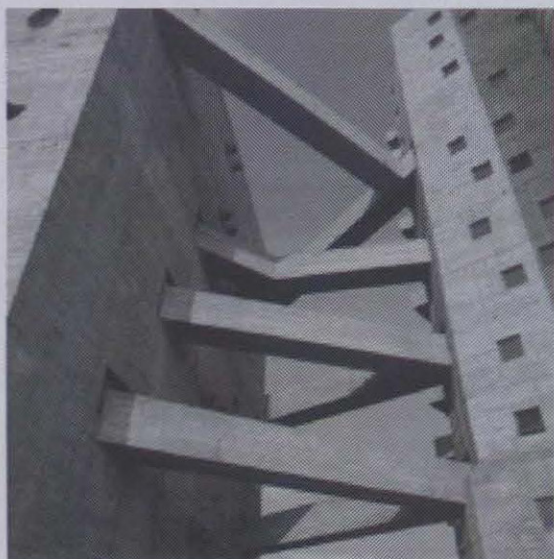


Fig. 7.

For Lina, context included the programming of a building, an ephemeral space or an object, that would thrive beyond inherited expectations. She would always start her research by talking to people and by making exhaustive notes about their complete *modus vivendi*. She looked closely into people's lives and behaviours, their idiosyncrasies, desires, dreams, and particular wishes. She regarded their histories, their cultural collections, their social bodies and political struggles with dignity, respect, and responsibility. Above all, she regarded people as the real generator of her propositions. This relationship was different from the usual client/architect relationship; she would always take every circumstance as a possibility for self-learning and exploration, at the same time that she would let herself be adopted as the agent for achieving that collective dream, more than simply providing for a primal physical need. Lina created an "architecture with skirts" that is not only visually denoted in buildings like the Valéria Cirell's Home (1958; fig. 5), or the Santa Maria dos Anjos Chapel (1978; fig. 6), but it is present in all her work through a powerful gesture of nurturing—nurturing what is already there, giving back the noble and appropriate place of one's own history. For Lina, the "site" initiated in the people's hearts, and the design process was a response to what she originally had found. Lina's most important material was the human one.

If there is a moment where a synthesis of Lina Bo Bardi's language can be detected, from the formal decisions to the process of a practice, from the understanding of her embracing attitude to the always-present technical rigour, it is in the Sesc-Pompéia factory, a moment of which she was so proud (fig. 1, fig. 7). The evocative concrete-cast sports complex is at the same time history-bound, preserving the local character of building through the renovation of the industrial pavilion, but it is as well a mark of her contemporary perception. The revamped program transforms an originally work-related place into a leisure center, "a place for doing nothing and being lazy" as she says. It is an inhabited place with the theatricality of people's universes, a vivacious and tangible allegory of life.

Everywhere she went Lina was able to influence artists and architects, specially the younger generations. "Dona Lina",<sup>3</sup> as she is dearly known in Salvador, Bahia, was one of the most important mentors of a local group of young artists (including Caetano Veloso and Glauber Rocha), who later were the piv-



otal figures in the creation of the "Cinema Novo" and "Tropicalismo," crucial moments that redefined and exposed the culture of Brazil to the world.<sup>4</sup> She has left us with a legacy that renders freedom to the architectural gesture, giving the same dignified importance to the sketch of a jewel or the design of an imaginary house, or to the creation of an ample institutional building. Her attention to and love of the practice of architecture, her openness of spirit and deep desire to change, her experimentalism, artistry, and passion remain as a significant motivation for the newer generations. For we have to face the challenge of architecture with the same open spirit she did.

1. "Paulista" means from São Paulo, and "Carioca" means from Rio de Janeiro.

2. Participating as a collaborator with São Paulo architect Paulo Mendes da Rocha's 1984 competition entry for the Public Library of Rio de Janeiro, I had the opportunity to witness the persistent dispute between these two groups of architects. In Mendes da Rocha's design there was a one-hundred meter span between two supporting walls that constituted the sheltering structure of the open plaza and the underground library. It would have been the longest prestressed, reinforced concrete span in the world. Paulo's proposition was defeated in favor of Glauro Campello's duller project. Campello washad collaborated previously with Oscar Niemeyer, who was then the leading member of the competition's jury. Years later, Oscar Niemeyer executed a one-hundred meter reinforced concrete span in the Latin American Memorial in São Paulo.

3. "Dona" in Brazilian Portuguese is an affectionate and honourable term equivalent to our "Mrs.," accentuating, however, a mother figure image. The use of the first name to address a person is a respectful, cordial, and informal manner that translates a fragment of the Brazilian character. I couldn't possibly refer to Lina Bo Bardi in this text as "Bo Bardi."

4. Both movements, along with "Bossa Nova," played a crucial role in redefining "Brazilianess" during the 1960s. They are the followers of the 1922 event "Semana de 22" (Week of 22), a nationwide cultural festival in São Paulo which brought together the what were supposed to be most representative local expressions of the day. At that time literary figure Oswald de Andrade coined the ironic term "Antropofagia" to describe the Brazilian cultural process: a system that ingested, digested, and then expelled all foreign influences, especially the ones from Europe, melting them together with local native traditions to generate what has been loosely called "Brazilian culture," which is defined, in this way, by the total acceptance of the "Other." The literal translation of "Antropofagia" is cannibalism, so that the term recalls the fate of the first European explorers who were eaten by the natives during the first days of colonization.

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