

Modernist heritage: The spread of modern architecture in Brazil

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Introduction:

Brazilian architecture entered the 1950s enjoying world-wide recognition for its quality and ingenuity. More than one hundred articles about Brazilian architecture were published abroad between 1947 and 1949, according to the Avery Index (LARA, 2000b). In Brazil, during the whole 1950s, architects were very busy designing and building, the country exploding in a huge construction site. The urban-industrial consolidation after 1950 had created a cultural market for architecture (BAYEUX, 1991). Government offices had been investing in a modern image and architecture was a great tool or conveyor for such image. This was happening since the Vargas government in the 1930s but with the Kubitschek presidency (1955-1960) it achieves an intensity that it never had before, galvanizing the whole society around the idea of "modernization". The optimism of those times was reinforced by the international recognition of the quality of Brazilian modern architecture.

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



Figure 1, Modernist House, built on the 1950s, demolished.

As the historiography states, in Latin America in general and in Brazil in particular, Modern Architecture achieved a distinct level of identity (FRASER, 2000b; SEGRE, 1991, 1994). It is also common knowledge that it had been strongly influenced by Le Corbusier and Bauhaus ideals, but somehow achieved a broader and deeper dissemination. The outstanding examples of the 1940s and 50s, labeled "anti-rationalist pioneers" by Pevsner (1961), by combining the modernist avant-garde and the traditional heritage, can be considered a modernist success in terms of popular acceptance. Such acceptance can be perceived in the innumerable elements of Modern Architecture adopted and applied to middle-class houses in many Brazilian cities during the 50's and 60's.

Modernity applied: the paradigm reaches the middle class

Governmental support and blending of modernity and heritage cannot explain alone the singular success of Brazilian Modern Architecture. 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, and the 1950's were known as "Golden Years" due to its promises, optimism and apparently stable democracy and economy. The working middle class grew in terms of political and economic importance and adopted an urban way of life. Such middle class demanded a modern look, or in other words, a modern facade.

In the periphery of every Brazilian major city we can find modernist elements applied to middle-class housing. Thirsty for any modernity, Brazilian households of the 1950s adopted modernism as the fashionable style for their houses. Brazilian Modern Architecture was adopted as the aesthetic paradigm, despite regional differences or social discrepancies.



Figure 2. House in Belo Horizonte, Brazil,

The city of Belo Horizonte represents the typical 20th century Brazilian city. Designed to be the capital of the state of Minas Gerais in 1897, Belo Horizonte presented a combination of 19th and early 20th centuries architecture styles. Neo-classical governmental buildings cohabited with neo-gothic cathedrals, neo-baroque schools, art-nouveau cafes and art-deco office buildings. Once an elitist proposal, Brazilian Modern Architecture gradually went through all social strata. Immediately after Pamplona was built, the rich and illustrious ones start commissioning architects (or other design professionals) to build their houses according to the new paradigm.

At the west, north and east peripheries of Belo Horizonte, thousands of small houses were built with modernist facades. The vast majority not designed by architects, those houses presents modernist elements re-used, re-adapted, and re-designed. It is important to note that those houses' ground plan is almost the same as it was at the turn of the century, indicating that issues like family function and organization remained almost the same. The important changes happened at the facade, presenting the adoption of modernist elements as a fashionable phenomena or a status sign.

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

The Brazilian case becomes even more singular when we consider the traditional divide between modernist high-art/institutional and commercial buildings on one hand, and traditional styles/popular culture/houses on the other (HUYSSSEN, 1986; COLOMINA, 1996). This divide between a traditional place to live and a modernist place to work has been a trademark of North-American modern architecture (OCKMAN, 1996; SCOTT-BROWN, 1977). The fact that the Brazilian middle class of the 1950s adopted modernism as its desired and fashionable style is a very intriguing deviation, a phenomenon that deserves study and investigation and that should contribute to the literature on 20th century architecture.

The vast majority of these Brazilian houses were not designed by architects, but nevertheless presented modernist elements re-used and re-designed. Built by the owners themselves with the help of a contractor and unskilled workers, the houses show an ingenious adaptation and application of a modernist vocabulary. Most of the houses were built in lots of 12 x 30 meters, with a facade usually only 9 or 8 meters wide only. Despite the narrow lots, these houses present quite complex facade compositions, usually with one or two major volumes defined by different roof slopes and other minor elements that complete the facade.

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

What it really means in terms of modernist dissemination and appropriation needs to be further investigated. When in 1955 Walter Gropius visited Niemeyer's own house at Canoas, he commented that the house was truly beautiful but could not be mass-produced. Gropius comments echoed for decades among Brazilian architects who saw his remarks as bitter criticism. Since little pre-fabrication was being used in Brazil, the country could not figure among the leading design nations despite the beautiful forms of its buildings.

What is interesting to perceive from this study of Popular Modernism is a striking gap between production and re-production. While Niemeyer's house could not be mass-



Figure 3. House in Belo Horizonte, Brazil,

produced as Gropius thought every house should be, its aesthetic was at that very same moment being re-produced in hundreds of thousands of middle class houses. I would conclude this section with the statement that escaping the modernist obsession with production, Brazilian modernism was massively re-produced, with processes and techniques adapted to the local reality. With the blending together of such contradictory trends, the Brazilian middle class may have built a unique kind of modernism with a post-modern attitude.

The phenomenon of Popular Modernism is, therefore, as much a result of this dual-faced modernization as it is a result of the high/popular and the modern/traditional dualities. Such double roots would be mainly manifested in the overlapping of a modernist façade hiding a conservative plan, but it also unfolds into a discussion of universality versus particularity; or center versus periphery

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