

Lina Bo Bardi's Alternative Approach to Modern Architecture in Brazil

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Lina Bo Bardi plays a very important role in the modernization of architecture in Brazil. Because of her unique background and perspective, her buildings stand out from even the modern architecture in Brazil. She was born in Italy in 1914 and grew up in a time of war and a rise in fascism. She studied architecture and worked on design publications in Italy until 1946, when she moved to Brazil after the second World War along with her newly wedded husband, Pietro Maria Bardi. Together, they were deeply involved in the art and architectural scene in Brazil from the start.¹

Many would classify Bo Bardi as a modernist architect, and this is fair; she used many architectural principles that align with the ideas of modernism, such as open floor plans and simplified geometries.² However, she approached architecture with a cultural and anthropological focus, and in doing so, it can be said that she was able to “hybridize modern and vernacular repertoires” in her architecture.³ This is what set her apart the most from other modern architects in Brazil at the time. She was not concerned with developing her own modern architectural vocabulary,⁴ but rather making architecture that reflected everyday life and expressed freedom, not beauty.⁵ These ideas can be witnessed in two of her most famous buildings, the Museu de Arte de São Paulo and SESC Pompeia. Through these projects, she was able to practice culturally and socially focused architecture using modern ideas of form and space to reflect two very different contexts.

The Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP) was Lina Bo Bardi’s most visible work, as she received both national and worldwide exposure since the completion of the project in 1968. Conception of the building began in 1957, but construction was delayed multiple times due to both structural and political complications. The original design featured a long rectangular box

¹ Andre Lepik, “Simplicidade e Clareza’: Lina Bo Bardi as a Role Model,” in *Lina Bo Bardi 100: Brazil’s Alternative Path to Modernism*, ed. Andre Lepik and Vera Simone Bader (Munich: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2014), 17.

² Vera Simone Bader, “From Italy to Brazil: From Vernacular Building to Modern Architecture,” in *Lina Bo Bardi 100: Brazil’s Alternative Path to Modernism*, ed. Andre Lepik and Vera Simone Bader (Munich: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2014), 87.

³ Zeuler R. M. A. Lima, “The Faces of Janus: Modernism and Hybridisation in the Architecture of Lina Bo Bardi,” *The Journal of Architecture* 11, no. 2, (2006): 257-267, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602360600787124>.

⁴ Sabine von Fischer, “The Horizons of Lina Bo Bardi: The Museu de Arte de São Paulo in the Context of European Postwar Concepts of Architecture,” in *Lina Bo Bardi 100: Brazil’s Alternative Path to Modernism*, ed. Andre Lepik and Vera Simone Bader (Munich: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2014), 104.

⁵ Zeuler R. M. A. Lima, “The Faces of Janus: Modernism and Hybridisation in the Architecture of Lina Bo Bardi,” *The Journal of Architecture* 11, no. 2, (2006): 257-267, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602360600787124>.

suspended from a system of four large piers and two large beams, all made of raw, pre-stressed reinforced concrete. Since then, many details of the design changed, such as the façade material from concrete panels to glazing, and the addition of the iconic red waterproof paint on the thick piers and beams.⁶ By its completion, São Paulo had a new cultural monument that showcased ideals of social equality and freedom for the city.

A few different design strategies that are consistent throughout Bo Bardi's work were first reflected in MASP. Some of her design priorities were to incorporate public space and contradict the monumentalism and hierarchy that museums typically reflect.⁷ In addition, a concept made visible in MASP is what Bo Bardi referred to as "arquitetura pobre" or "simple architecture". What she meant by this can be interpreted in a couple different ways, as it manifests itself differently in her various projects.⁸ In sum, she explains that she "looked for a simple architecture, an architecture that could immediately communicate that which, in the past, was called monumental, meaning the sense of collective, civic dignity."⁹

In MASP, the architecture is simple in its geometry, a large rectangle suspended by a structural system that is visual simplified to just to sets of piers and beams. The building is also simple in material, which "does not hide the construction elements and leaves raw concrete on display."¹⁰ Furthermore, by using these simple architectural elements, Bo Bardi make direct political and social connections, as she attempts to eliminate "the cultural snobbery that is so dear to contemporary intellectuals and architects," she describes.¹¹ By making architecture that was "simple", she was defying the mainstream approaches to modern architecture in Brazil, since she emphasized creating modern spaces to express society and culture more than expressing modern forms and aesthetics.¹²

⁶ Zeuler R. M. de A. Lima and Barry Bergdoll, *Lina Bo Bardi* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 122-127, 136.

⁷ Sabine von Fischer, "The Horizons of Lina Bo Bardi: The Museu de Arte de São Paulo in the Context of European Postwar Concepts of Architecture," in *Lina Bo Bardi 100: Brazil's Alternative Path to Modernism*, ed. Andre Lepik and Vera Simone Bader (Munich: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2014), 103.

⁸ Lima, "Modernism and Hybridisation," 260.

⁹ Lima and Bergdoll, *Lina Bo Bardi*, 137.

¹⁰ Lima and Bergdoll, *Lina Bo Bardi*, 134.

¹¹ Lima and Bergdoll, *Lina Bo Bardi*, 137.

¹² Fischer, "Horizons of Lina Bo Bardi," 104.

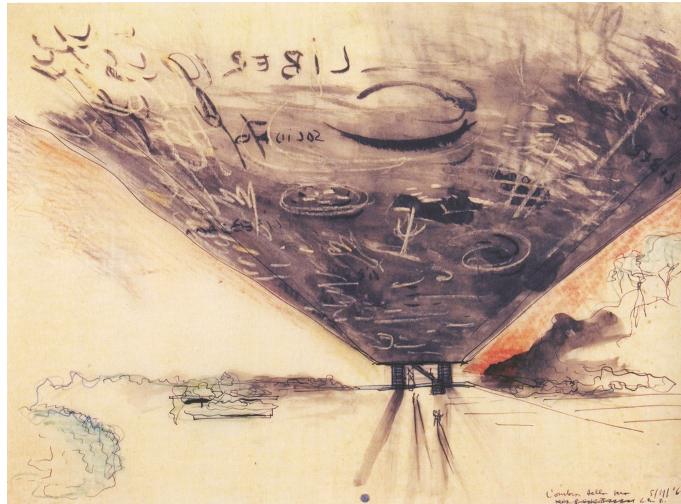


Figure 1: Study for MASP Terrace, source: Lima and Bergdoll, *Lina Bo Bardi*, 124.

She designed transparent glass easels for all the artwork to hang, with no obvious organization of works, allowing sightlines to be unobstructed by gallery walls.¹³ In this way, she used modern concepts of space to reflect equality and freedom rather than beauty, as she emphasized that society's needs are much more important than her own tastes.¹⁴

Many similar design concepts were reflected in her later prominent work, SESC Pompeia. This project, however, was commissioned by a very different client, and therefore the way she executes many of her design priorities, which remained consistent throughout her career, differs from what she did with MASP. Bo Bardi was asked to design a new public leisure and recreation center for SESC (a non-profit social service trade organization) on the site of an old steel barrel factory, which they had been using unconventionally for various activities. Her visit to the site was the biggest inspiration to the design, as she was drawn to the "rationally displayed sheds" of the old factory, but more importantly to the activities that took place. She said:

“no longer was there just the elegant and solitary structure but also a joyous crowd of children, parents, and elderly people moving from one pavilion to the next... I thought all of that would have to continue as it was, with all that joy.”¹⁵

In many ways, she wanted to reflect social equality and freedom in this design that she thought had previously lacked in the design of museums. This can be seen in her prioritizing public space, which is prevalent in her illustrations of the terrace that lies beneath the long concrete slabs (Figure 1). Also, she wanted to eliminate monumentalism and hierarchy in the design of the interior permanent gallery.

¹³ Lima and Bergdoll, *Lina Bo Bardi*, 134.

¹⁴ Fischer, “Horizons of Lina Bo Bardi,” 103-4.

¹⁵ Lima and Bergdoll, *Lina Bo Bardi*, 159.

From that point, preservation of culture and everyday life became a priority for the design, more so than in MASP.

Lina Bo Bardi thought preservation had a strong political purpose and should “address a historic present” rather than simply emulating historical styles.¹⁶ Therefore, she maintained the existing factory as much as possible, careful not to disrupt the beauty that already existed in its use, but rather to preserve the “perception of an existing lived space under the structure.”¹⁷ In addition, she created two towers for the sports complex that was needed in the program, and in these designs, she practices her concept of simple architecture, once again (Figure 2). Many design decisions regarding organization throughout the complex were pragmatic, as opposed to some of the more conceptual representations in MASP. What is consistent between the projects, however, is the use of modern ideas to express designs that are focused on the real lives of people, culture, and society.

Lina Bo Bardi was drawn to the rational organization of the original factory, so she translated such thought in many decisions from geometry of newer structures to programmatic layout. For example, the old factory remained as the location of gathering spaces and leisure activities including a theater, restaurant, and library because the “buildings’ horizontality would make spontaneous social integration easier.”¹⁸ Also, the design of the new towers was based simply on the area available on the complicated, small and restrictive site. To compliment the simple concrete structures, she filled interior spaces with bright color schemes based on the seasons, custom designed furniture, colorful signs, and even employee uniforms.¹⁹ With this combination of raw simplicity and joyful decoration, “Bo Bardi wanted to create buildings

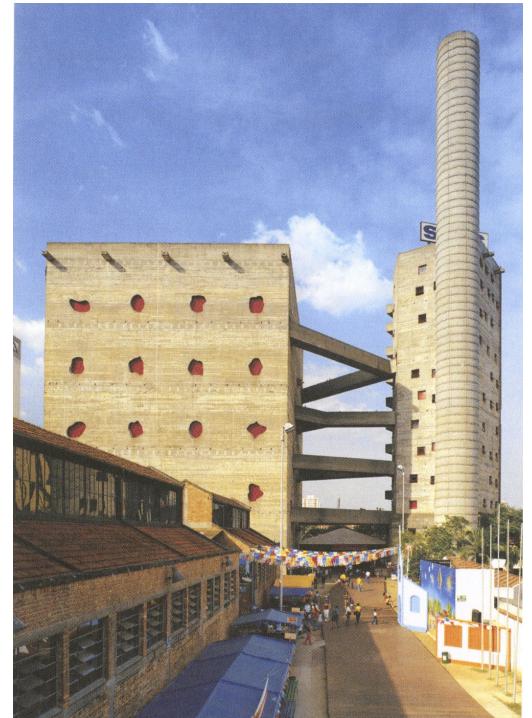


Figure 2: SESC Pompeia Leisure Center towers, view over boardwalk. source: Lima and Bergdoll, *Lina Bo Bardi*, 169.

¹⁶ Zeuler Lima, “Preservation as Confrontation: The Work of Lina Bo Bardi,” *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism* 2, no. 2 (2005): 24-33, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25834973>.

¹⁷ Lima, “Modernism and Hybridisation,” 263.

¹⁸ Lima and Bergdoll, *Lina Bo Bardi*, 159.

¹⁹ Lima and Bergdoll, *Lina Bo Bardi*, 159, 170, 173.

distinguished on the one hand by their liveliness and on the other by their simplicity.”²⁰ Bo Bardi was able to combine many of her passions in this building, and in the end became “her most complete and mature tribute to the Brazilian people, to freedom and democracy, and to social integration.” As one of her last major projects, it is often seen as a summation of her work with its portrayal of handmade work, innovative technology, and the incorporation of culture and tradition into modern architecture.²¹

Both MASP and SESC Pompeia are projects that Lina Bo Bardi used to express her value for people over aesthetics. She described both buildings as “ugly” to stress that she cared much more about joy and freedom than she did beauty.²² It is not just ideas like this that set her apart from other modernists that worked in Brazil. Her actions reflected a prioritization of people of traditional conventions as well. One example is her transferring her studio office to the construction site for both MASP and SESC Pompeia. She was critical of the architectural profession and modern architecture in many ways, such as the dichotomy that existed between engineers and architects.²³ She was also critical of the way Brazil had modernized in architecture as just “the formalization of Le Corbusier’s ideas” without reflecting the Brazilian people or culture in any way.²⁴ It was many of these views and ideas that set her apart, but also isolated her from the predominately male, modernist architecture scene. But it is for this separation from the majority that made her designs distinct, in addition to her unique perspective influencing her humanitarian approach.²⁵

Finally, it is important to study architects that are not only influential, but are unique in their background and approach. Like other modern architects, Lina Bo Bardi could have seen Brazil as an underdeveloped canvas to make whatever she would like and blindly modernize Brazil as rapidly as possible²⁶, but instead, focused on creating architecture that was for the Brazilian people, architecture that reflected their culture, history, and society. She thought

²⁰ Andre Lepik and Vera Simone Bader, ed., *Lina Bo Bardi 100: Brazil's Alternative Path to Modernism*, (Munich: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2014), 267.

²¹ Lima and Bergdoll, *Lina Bo Bardi*, 174.

²² Andre and Bader, *Lina Bo Bardi 100*, 104, 267.

²³ Lima and Bergdoll, *Lina Bo Bardi*, 127.

²⁴ Lima, “Modernism and Hybridisation,” 263.

²⁵ Fischer, “Horizons of Lina Bo Bardi,” 109.

²⁶ Andre Lepik, “Simplicidade e Clareza”: Lina Bo Bardi as a Role Model,” in *Lina Bo Bardi 100: Brazil's Alternative Path to Modernism*, ed. Andre Lepik and Vera Simone Bader (Munich: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2014), 19.

critically and contextually about the buildings she designed, without too much focus on pure aesthetics. In a contemporary setting, one can learn from architects like Lina Bo Bardi that history and context should not be excluded from architecture no matter the style or time period.

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