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BARDI POLITIC

Thanks to several building projects from the 1950s on, Lina Bo Bardi made her mark on the deprived Brazilian city of Salvador. Fusing Modernism with a peasant vernacular, the Italian émigrée designed social housing, a womblike restaurant, a cultural centre commemorating African slave culture and more – an *Arquitetura Povera* whose legacy lives on, writes Libby Sellers. Photography: Matthieu Salvaing

Above: the entrance to the Museum of Modern Art of Bahia, where Bo Bardi served as both architect and director. Opposite: this red detailing, again at MAMB, was a recurrent feature of later projects





This page, clockwise from top left: the MAMB staircase links a library, exhibition areas, an auditorium and a projection room; allegedly, it was inspired by a mortise-and-tenon joint the architect saw on an oxcart; each tread is two metres wide; the staircase was a tribute to local craft traditions. Opposite: the red of the door nods to Candomblé, an Afro-Brazilian religion created by the enslaved peoples







Opposite: the exhibition corridor of Casa do Benin, a cultural centre that remembers trafficked slaves. This page, clockwise from top left: a suspended steel staircase in the former colonial building; Bo Bardi's 'Giraffe' chairs are now collectors' items; this thatched stucco hut once served as an offsite meeting space; the folding 'Frei Egidio' chairs were modelled on a 15th-century Franciscan design



IF, AS Frank Lloyd Wright quipped, ‘constraints are an architect’s best friend’, then Lina Bo Bardi was one well-acquainted practitioner. Architect, designer, curator, editor, scenographer and educator – first in Italy, then Brazil – she had a prolific if non-linear career covering war and revolution, cultural and economic divides, social and gender disparities. Yet it’s precisely these constraints, or rather her deft negotiation of their complexities in pursuit of her many and varied works, that make Bo Bardi so fêted today.

Finally, we’ve woken up to her merging of Modernism with vernacular traditions, her reuse of existing buildings and her desire to prioritise people over places. This interest has come too late for some projects, impaired by political tensions, unsympathetic custodians or the ravages of time. To mark 30 years since her death, it seems appropriate to revisit some of her lesser-preserved architectural work in Salvador, the northeastern capital of Bahia, Brazil.

An émigrée from Milan to São Paulo after World War II, Bo Bardi had been working in Brazil for over a decade when she arrived in Salvador in 1958. While it was not her first trip to Bahia, the circumstances of her appointment there as visiting lecturer in architecture and envoy for her Museum of Art in São Paulo introduced Bo Bardi to the city’s emergent, albeit unlikely, role as a centre of avant-garde thinking.

The former capital of Brazil, with its colonial remnants and historic infrastructure fused with a lively Afro-Brazilian culture, Salvador was facing upheaval. The discovery of oil, and the consequential investment, prompted a debate on modernisation and regeneration. Inspired by the potential she saw, Bo Bardi resolved to stay. A newspaper column she wrote – ‘Chronicles of art, history, costume, living culture. Architecture. Painting. Sculpture. Visual Arts’ – hinted at her

ambitions; private letters spoke of an ‘unimaginable and unreal country where everything needed to be done’.

Bo Bardi’s first public project in the region stemmed from being appointed director of the Museum of Modern Art of Bahia. As a location she chose the Solar do Unhão, formerly a sugar works, tobacco factory and ammunition dump, with links to the slave trade. Rather than erase its past, Bo Bardi unified old and new with minimal mediation. ‘To violate an era by embalming it in plaster means ignoring the fatigued and painful process of humanity,’ she said.

The renovations mirrored her objectives for the museum – to integrate education, art, craft and industry, African and pre-colonial cultural references as expressions of the true modern Brazil. As well as using red for access points and structural systems, her main symbolic intervention was a majestic freestanding staircase. Constructed with traditional craft joinery, the wooden helix rose throughout the building in homage to the popular voice Bo Bardi heard rising across Bahia. The gesture was not lost on her detractors.

In April 1964, its opening year, the museum was forcibly closed due to both local partisan infighting and Brazil’s military coup d’état. Bo Bardi’s collection was packed in wooden crates and she was expelled from Bahia. The prevailing euphoria ended abruptly and a 20-year black cloud descended on the state’s hopes for regeneration.

Bo Bardi buried her frustrations in her work – notably the São Paulo museum (MASP) and the mixed-use cultural centre SESC Pompéia. But her time in the northeast had altered her political and aesthetic philosophies. Inspired by its extreme conditions, the ingenuity of populist communities and syncretic aesthetic traditions, she dedicated herself to simple designs, local materials and a style of architecture she called



Opposite, top left: a clash of concrete, trees and ruin – the entrance to Coati via wrought-iron doors. Top right: with engineer João Filgueiras Lima, Bo Bardi developed a modular system of corrugated concrete to stabilise the restaurant's old and new structures. This page: a mango tree dramatically pierces the building's dining area



The ruin of the Coati served as an inspiring location for Brazilian art collective Araka in Isaac Julien's video installation *A Marvellous Entanglement* (2019). Opposite: Bo Bardi's architecture focused on the movement of people through spaces. In homage, Julien commissioned a site-responsive dance piece by choreographer Zebrinha



Arquitetura Povera (poor, or simple, architecture). ‘I made the most of my years in northeast of Brazil, a lesson of popular experience, not as a folkloric romanticism but as an experiment in simplification,’ she said.

In 1985, as the military dictatorship ended and Salvador’s historic centre gained Unesco World Heritage status, Bo Bardi returned to Bahia and her preference for societal regeneration over grand architectural gestures. Under a broader plan of urban renewal, she conceived the redevelopment of one its poorest and most historically sensitive areas – the Ladeira da Misericórdia (translated as the slope of pity or misery, the steep route was used to carry cargo, on the backs of African slaves, from the port up to the city).

Alongside social housing converted from derelict, abandoned buildings, Bo Bardi incorporated an adjacent vacant lot for a new-built restaurant. With its experimental prefabricated corrugated-concrete structure, Coati represents sympathetic ingenuity amid extreme poverty and great natural beauty. Admired by locals and tourists, it enjoyed only brief success. Save for weeds and the odd squatter, the site remains uninhabited. Though it has not gone unobserved.

In *A Marvellous Entanglement*, his poetic 2019 multi-screen video installation, the British artist Isaac Julien employed Bo Bardi’s architecture and philosophies as the nucleus around which in-situ performances and enactments whirl. For Julien, Salvador represented the ‘perfect match between Bo Bardi’s radical ideas and its local culture’. Coati and the Ladeira feature heavily; performances by Brazilian actors Fernanda Montenegro and Fernanda Torres and Brazilian art collective Araka are redolent of all the mysticism and tension that informed the architect’s later work. As Julien noted, filming in ‘modern ruins offered an alternative to the well-trodden

Bo Bardi tour. While other artists focus on her glass house [the Casa de Vidro (*WoI* May 2010), her first project, created in 1951 as a residence for herself], I see Coati as my glass house – a masterpiece that needs attention, needs to be revived.’ As *A Marvellous Entanglement* continues its international tour, that message is being received loud and clear.

Concurrent with Coati, Bo Bardi oversaw the Casa do Benin, a cultural centre built as reparation for the trafficking of slaves from Benin to Brazil. Again she adapted an existing building and layered a Modernist aesthetic and vernacular craft processes to reveal the qualities of the materials and cultures she was supporting. Across the interior elevated steel gangways and staircases of concrete and stone merged with woven-fibre-clad columns, suspended textiles and robust, unpretentious furniture she designed. Nina Yashar, founder of Milan’s Nilufar Gallery and long a Bo Bardi fan, describes these pieces as ‘a compelling fusion of essential lines and local artisanship; somewhat imperfect but in that imperfection you witness the peak of Lina’s talent. She allowed the authentic culture of Brazil to permeate her work.’

For all that Bo Bardi drew from her adopted homeland, the relationship was not one-sided. While an international audience now appreciates her socially responsible and culturally sensitive work, it’s long been a source of inspiration for compatriots. Says Brazilian-born designer Fernando Campana: ‘The beauty is she didn’t appropriate the culture. She offered her European gaze, highlighting the potential of our resources and handcrafts... to appreciate and be proud of our traditions and culture. Her legacy is a massive force in the way our studio perceives design as an expression of humanity’ ■ *The Instituto Lino Bo e PM Bardi is based in the Casa de Vidro. For more information, visit portal.institutobardi.org*