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Roberto ROCCO

The image of the city Sao Paulo – Identity and crisis

1. Introduction – Brazil builds

In 1943, the MoMA of New York opened a spectacular photographic exhibition named »Brazil Builds: Architecture New and Old 1652 -1942«. Organised by architect Philip Goodwin, of MoMA International Relations Commission, and G. E. Kiddersmith, one of the greatest photographers of architecture in the XX century, the show introduced to the world what was then one of the most resourceful and original architectural movements in existence.

It was not a small surprise for art and architecture critics to find out that one of the largest and most paradigmatic modernist architectural projects had been carried out in Rio de Janeiro. In 1936, young architect Lucio Costa, closely assisted by Le Corbusier himself, had designed the building of the *Ministry of Education*, completed in 1944. It contained all elements Le Corbusier claimed for a modernist architecture, such as the *pilotis*, the *toit-jardin*, the *brise-soleil* and the *pan-verre* (Frampton, 1992: 254)

»Brazil Builds« introduced a whole new generation of young architects working feverishly somewhere else than Europe and North America: Oscar Niemeyer, Lucio Costa, brothers Marcelo and Milton Roberto, Afonso Reidy, Gregori Warchavchik, Roberto Burle-Marx, Rino Levi, Alvaro Vital Brazil, among others. The architecture being made in Brazil became known as the »Brazilian School« and its exponents were distinguished by specialised critique as a »different branch of modernism« (Segawa, FSP: 30.09.2003).

As Frampton (1992) brilliantly summarises: »In Brazil, modern architecture had its origins in the mid-20's partnership of Lucio Costa and Gregori Warchavchik, an émigré Russian architect who had been influenced by Futurism during his studies in Rome and who had been responsible for the first cubistic houses in Brazil. With the revolution headed by Getulio Vargas in 1930 and the appointment of Costa as head of the schools of Fine Arts in Rio de Janeiro in 1931, modern architecture came to be welcomed in Brazil as a matter of national policy« (Frampton, 1992: 254). As World War II drew to an end, Brazil woke up from the turmoil of Getulio Vargas dictatorship and emerged as the »country of the future«. A spectacular economic growth was starting to come into view. Brazil would soon plunge into a period of remarkable prosperity and lasting democracy. Modern Architecture was intimately related to the project of modernisation of the country. This culminated in the construction of a brand new capital city, Brasilia, in the vast unoccupied lands of central Brazil.

Brasilia, planned by Costa, was erected from the scratch in a remarkably short span of time in the second half of the 50's. Its main buildings were commissioned to another young architect who had come into partnership with Costa during the construction of the Ministry of Education in Rio, Oscar Niemeyer. Frampton recognises that Brasilia, with its inhuman monumentality and intrinsic class separation, led

The image of city in popular culture

Brazilian modernist architecture to a crisis, which eventually went along a global reaction against the precepts of the CIAM and the Modern Movement (Frampton, 1992: 256).

However, by 1964, not much after the complexation of the city, conservative forces associated to communism-scared middle classes and conservative sectors of the army, largely supported by the United States, launched a coup d'état. The Cold War was at its peak, and the United States would not tolerate a progressive left-oriented government in Latin America or another »Cuba« in the continent.

The military regime took up the task to bring the dormant giant country into modernity and paradoxically assumed »progress« and »modernity« as its own ideology. Not without reason, Brasília became the symbol of the paradoxes encountered by modernity and the modernist project in association with conservative and backward forces. By its own formal qualities, the city came to embody authoritarianism. By this time, signs of exhaustion of the modernist project were unmistakable and Brazilian architecture was deeply sunk into a crisis. To make matters even worse, the ideology of progress associated with modernism encountered an unexpected and apparently insurmountable obstacle at the 1973 Oil Crisis and the break of the Bretton-Woods agreements, which led the so-called »Brazilian economic miracle« to a sudden halt. Although deeply embedded with the ideology of progress and modernity, the upper and middle classes progressively lost their faith in such a project as the country's economy went into decline after 1973, despite of the efforts of the military regime to keep the level of investments by taking massive loans in the international market, pushing Brazilian international debt to impossible heights. The concentration of wealth increased, as elites found ways to maintain their standards of consumption while the rest of the population suffered a progressive impoverishment.

During the period comprised between WW II and the 1973 Oil Crisis, São Paulo, the industrial heart of Brazil, experienced an unprecedented population growth due mainly to internal migrations from the impoverished areas in the Northeast of the country. The population went from 3.783 million in 1960 to 5.825 million in 1970 and 8.493 million in 1980 (it reached 10.406 million in 2000, excluding the metropolitan area). Large peripheries sprawled in all directions, lacking proper infrastructure and planning. The project of a modern industrialised country was at a stake, as the contradictions between a wealthy and cosmopolitan elite and a poor and destitute population grew exponentially, resulting in urban violence and corruption.

3. Back to the past: crisis in the representation of the city

Already by the end of the 60's, Brazilian engineer and real estate developer Adolpho Lindenberg started presenting the market with a new product: residential towers of »neoclassic« style (in reality, a collage of neoclassic and eclectic references). In 1978, Lindenberg delivered the »Golden Gate« building, a neoclassic-inspired monstrosity with a triplex penthouse of 1800 square meters, which became a paradigm for upper class residential building in the city. Since then, buildings of »neoclassic« or »eclectic« style started spreading in the city of São Paulo. The phenomenon only accentuated itself in the 90's, culminating with a »neoclassic« resurgence in the last five years.

The lack of a clear national project and the confusion of the country's elite in search of symbols of their power and status brought back an architectural style that symbolised »nobility and solidity« (Henrique Cambiaghi, president of AS-BEA, Brazilian Association of Architectural Offices, FSP: 17.08.2003: 6) and »impressiveness and luxury« (FSP: 22.07.2002: 1).

In fact, the style was not completely foreign in the national architectural scene: after the transfer of the Portuguese court to Brazil, following Napoleon's invasion of Portugal in 1808, neoclassicism in architecture was introduced in the country by the French Artistic Mission of 1816. The »mission«, engaged by the Portuguese court, aimed at improving artistic and architectural standards in the distant and backward colonial territory, now changed into the head of the »United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil and Algarves«. The »mission« was headed by Auguste Grandjean de Montigny, an accomplished architect awarded the »Prix de Rome«. He had worked for Napoleon, building, among other things, the »Palais Bellevue«, in Kassel, Germany. De Montigny was very active in Rio de Janeiro for a very a long period, imposing a new paradigm for distinctive official and private buildings in the court.

Later, an independent and Imperial Brazil (1822), with its own royal family and nobility, sought in France and its neoclassic and eclectic architecture the model for its own urban architecture. The Republic (1889), of strong positivist and illuminist inspirations, only accentuated the search for French models in architecture and urbanism. Illuminist inspired and long independent United States of America were also a reference.

The money brought by coffee in the middle of XIX century and a strong influx of European immigrants completely changed the face of the larger Brazilian cities in Southern Brazil at the time and São Paulo started soaring to its economic preponderance as the control centre of the coffee business. By then, the city had almost completely abandoned its provincial colonial façade in favour of a more cosmopolitan, European-inspired visage.

However, Brazilians soon started seeking for innovations in architectural form and program. Even before World War II, a modernist project started taking shape in Brazil, culminating in the rebellious and iconoclastic »Week of Modern Art« in 1922. The influence of immigrants (like Warshavchik) and the well educated elite who studied in Europe, made Brazil reasonably up to date with European avant-gardes, producing a rupture between old and new in art and architecture. The first modernist office building of São Paulo, *Edifício Esther*, dates back to 1937. It was a project of Alvaro Vital Brazil, who later Figured in the MoMA exhibition.

Thus, neoclassic style has already been part of a project of »modernisation« of a »backward« country imposed by a foreign colonial power. The »neoclassic« revival could be interpreted as part of another kind of »modernising« project related the ideology of globalisation and the insertion of the country in a »globalised world« and the introduction of the metropolis in the network of »global cities«, following American trends in architectural form and programme. However, it seems to be in fact the symptom of a much more significant crisis in the representation of the elites in the economic core of a country that has lost its faith in the future.

Globalisation is understood here as both a »reality«, insofar as it concerns the acceleration of phenomena intrinsic to capitalism (as indicated by Milton Santos), and a deceiving ideology of progress and inclusion, when, in fact, the required improvement in social-economic indicators have not followed the official discourse of liberalisation of markets and deregulation of work relations.

The exhaustion of the modernist project and its egalitarian utopias in Brazil is intimately related to the internal contradictions presented by the re-imposition of power by the traditional elites over the urban working classes after the 1964 military coup. This led to the collapse of the modernist style as the elite's aesthetic referential. Instead, these are times of nostalgia over better times; impregnated with »solid values« and »tradition«, same as in Argentina, where a popular saying goes »*todo pasado fué mejor*« (»all past was better«).

Examples of »neoclassic« style buildings produced for the elite are endless. Here we present one: in February 2001, construction company and real estate developer *Cyrela* launched residential tower »*Château de Tocqueville*« (in French), aimed at the »cr-me de la cr-me of the paulistana society«, according to published advertisements (FSP: 04.02.2001:1_4). It was constituted of one-per-floor apartments with 4 bedrooms, each bedroom equipped with its own bathroom, 4 or 5 parking places and 332.97 m² of floor area per apartment. A project of architect Itamar Berzin, the building counted with a luxurious double height, marble covered entrance hall, 3 lifts, a huge room for parties and social gatherings, billiard room, fitness room, dry sauna and a 25 meters long indoors heated swimming-pool. In 2003, *Cyrela* had 45 real residential developments in its São Paulo portfolio, almost all of them following the »neoclassic« style that continued to support sales. From 1996 to 2000, 72 % of *Cyrela's* new projects were in »neoclassic« style. According to the company itself, the option for »neoclassic« was made after consumer's surveys where 70 % of interviewees declared that they preferred neoclassic style over all others (FSP: 30.07.2000: I-1).

The importance of market strategies and economic issues seems to be well above any cultural considerations. Architect Itamar Berenzin declared: »People like the status given by the style and construction companies sell« (FSP: 28.07.2002: I-2). H. Cambiaghi (FSP: 17.08.2003: I-6) stresses that »neoclassic« has »two main advantages«: the favour of the public and the cheaper costs of construction. In fact, architect Israel Rewin stresses that »[aesthetic] resources like saliences [related to neoclassic ornamentation] match quite well the modern technique used in pre-moulded mortar façades. For Rewin, »contemporary lines would look poor using this method« (FSP: 17.08.2003: I-6).

Reactions against »neoclassicism« have started to appear and many have doomed it as »out fashioned«. However, more and more »neoclassic« buildings are launched every day.

4. Conclusion – upheaval?

In 2000, dwellers of a wealthy district called Alto de Pinheiros cooked a rebellion against »neoclassic« style. Abo- de of an illustrated and progressive elite, the district had been designed and urbanised at the beginning of XX century by Anglo-Canadian Company »*Companhia City de Ur-*

banização« (*City Company of Urbanisation*) after the model of the English »city-garden«. Paradoxically, it is a place where modernist houses of the best paulista architects are to be found. Represented by SAAP (The Society of Friends of Alto de Pinheiros), dwellers campaigned against the construction of a 12 residential towers complex in »neoclassic« style in the brink of the neighbourhood, where high-rise buildings are allowed by the zoning system. Architect Paulo Bastos, president of SAAP, asserted that »neoclassic style didn't have anything to do with the character of the neighbourhood. It is a cultural matter of importation of styles« (FSP: 04.06.2000: I-1). SAAP proclaimed that »neoclassic style is but a bad copy of European [styles] that puts in evidence the peripheral condition of the country [Brazil]« (FSP: 16.07.2000: I-1). As a result, the »neoclassic« façades had to be modified and 6 of the 12 towers were cancelled.

Due to the persistence and continuity of the »neoclassic« aesthetic phenomenon in São Paulo, on August 13, 2003, IAB (the Brazilian Institute of Architecture) promoted a seminar entitled »Neoclassic Architecture: Where do we go?«, gathering some of the main actors (architects, construction companies, real estate developers) and members of civil society. Gilberto Belleza, president of IAB São Paulo, pointed that the making of the seminar had been triggered by architect's worries on the poor quality of architecture being produced in the city, »a victim of market interests, the media and lack of information [by the public]« (IAB: 13.08.2003: www.iabsp.org.br/).

Professor Benedito Lima de Toledo of the University of São Paulo warned about the misinterpretation and manipulation of the label »neoclassic«, used as a trademark by the real estate market, lacking any real link with history and culture. He was backed by Philosopher Olgaria Matos, of the same University, for whom consumer's society and the media constantly presents us with »traps«: plagiarism, the taste for the exotic, the cult for novelty, etc. These deceiving phenomena would try to occupy the vacuum left by the exhaustion of modernity ideals. Such development would result, according to Matos, in a »culture of the disposable, the imitation, the copy of the copy, without [real] creation and innovation« In short, Matos calls our attention to the culture of the »façade« or the culture of imitation, which leaves aside primary questions, like living and dwelling with dignity (Matos, 2003).

All seem to lead to the conclusion that the reappearance of the »neoclassic« style and its persistence as a market triumph points towards a crisis of cultural identity and values amidst the crisis of modernity itself and ideals long sought and now abandoned.

Roberto Rocco, MSc, urban planner, University of São Paulo, Brazil, PhD student Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands
E-mail: robertorocco@uol.com.br

Illustrations:

Figure 1: *Palais Bellevue, Kassel, Germany. Architect: Grandjean de Montigny. Source: www.archwir.net*

Figure 2: *House France-Brazil (Palácio Grandjean de Montigny) in Rio de Janeiro. Architect Grandjean de Montigny. Source: RioTour*

- Figure 3:** *Cubist House, São Paulo (1929), by Gregori Warchavchik. Source: OLIVEIRA, M., Origins of Brazilian Modernism.*
- Figure 4:** *Ministry of Education, Rio de Janeiro (Palácio Gustavo Capanema, 1944). Architect: Lúcio Costa and team. Source: Instituto Moreira Salles*
- Figure 5:** *Ministry of Education, Rio de Janeiro (Palácio Gustavo Capanema, 1944). Architect: Lúcio Costa and team. Detail: pilotis and brise-soleils. Source: Instituto Moreira Salles.*
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- Figure 7:** *»Golden Gate« residential building (1978). Source: Adolpho Lindenberg.*
- Figure 8:** *»Château de Tocqueville« residential building (2001), São Paulo, Source Cyrela.*
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- Figure 11:** *»Jardins Granja Julieta« residential building (2003), São Paulo. Source: Tecnisa . Architect: Itamar Berenzin.*
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- Figure 13:** *»Grand Space Pinheiros« residential building (2002), São Paulo, Architect: Itamari Berenzin. Source: Tecnisa.*
- Figure 14:** *»Château de Belcastel«, residential building (2002), São Paulo, Source: Cyrela.*
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