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BEYOND MODERNITY – ANALYSIS OF SELECTED EXAMPLES OF LINA BO BARDI'S AVANT-GARDE PROJECTS

POZA NOWOCZESNOŚCIĄ – ANALIZA WYBRANYCH PRZYKŁADÓW AWANGARDOWYCH PROJEKTÓW LINY BO BARDI

Abstract

Regardless of the date of implementation, there are buildings whose architecture sometimes escapes too precise assignment to a specific trend, style or movement. This architecture remains modern long beyond the time of its creation, and when the recipient discovers that it creates its own world, not imitating the surrounding reality but looking for a separate language of expression – then we can call it avant-garde. The article presents analyses of selected buildings designed by Lina Bo Bardi. The features that allow to classify this architecture as avant-garde, abstracting from the too obvious time of implementation, functionality or spatial context, were indicated.

Keywords: contemporary architecture, theory, perception, Lina Bo Bardi

Streszczenie

Niezależnie od daty realizacji istnieją budowle, których architektura wymyka się niekiedy zbyt precyzyjnemu przyporządkowaniu do określonego nurtu, stylu czy ruchu. Owa architektura pozostaje nowoczesna długo poza czasem jej powstania, a w przypadku gdy odbiorca odkryje, że tworzy ona własny świat, nie naśladujący otaczającej rzeczywistości lecz szukający odrębnego języka wyrazu – wówczas możemy ją określić mianem awangardowej.

W artykule przedstawiono analizy wybranych budynków zaprojektowanych przez Linę Bo Bardi. Wskazano na cechy, które pozwalają klasyfikować tę architekturę jako awangardową, abstrahującą od zbyt oczywistego czasu realizacji, funkcjonalności czy kontekstu przestrzennego.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura współczesna, teoria, postrzeganie, Lina Bo Bardi

1. INTRODUCTION

When distinguishing phenomena significant for the image of modernity, Matei Calinescu points to modernism, the avant-garde, decadence, kitsch and postmodernism. Describing further the phenomenon of the avant-garde, he emphasises its radicalism, heroism, and sometimes also utopianism¹. He emphasises the need for a distanced approach to

¹ Cf. M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity. Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Post-modernism*, Duke University Press, Durham 1987, pp. 95–96.

the existing art and contempt for canons created in the past. The architecture of Brazil is also part of this trend of art seeking its own path, detached from the past and modern at the same time. And a newly formed country², a nation in search of a new identity taking into account ethnic diversity, is also in search of a new, “own” architecture, as Brasilia irrefutably attests.

In the absence of a common historical model, the achievements of Brazilian artists – different when compared to the world architecture – are not surprising³. It is not surprising that the colonial architecture was rejected – it has been imposed by steel and the crucifix; it is not surprising that there is no connection with the architecture of Africa – too distant physically, culturally and temporally; finally, it is not surprising that the local tradition of construction was not continued – too primitive and too outdated to build a new Brazilian society.

Among Brazilian modernist artists, we should, obviously, mention Oscar Niemeyer, Lucio Costa and Affonso Eduardo Reidy, “our” Lucjan Korngold, and a little later also Paulo Mendes da Rocha⁴. The figure of Lina Bo Bardi stands out, also in terms of her individual axis of life – Rome-Sao Paulo⁵, against the backdrop of this group, because of her thinking and creativity that seem to go far beyond the concept of modernity. Perhaps we could describe her designs as avant-garde.

2. MUSEU DE ARTE DE SÃO PAULO

The character of the space of Avenida Paulista is determined by the row of skyscrapers lined up on either side of the main street of São Paulo. Lina Bo Bardi contrasts this vertical dominance with the horizontal extension of the 8-metre-high building of the Museum of Art, completed between 1957 and 1968. The building is a seventy-four-metre-high structure, has two floors, and is suspended from two characteristic red spans. The building was constructed on the site of the previously existing Belvedere Trianon. Joaquim Eugênio de Lima, who had donated the plot of land to the city, made it a condition that the new building should not spoil the view. Today, MASP is not only the city’s landmark, but also one of the symbols of modern Brazilian architecture.

Two enormous red beams of prestressed concrete, supported by equally massive columns, form the basis of the entire structure⁶. A two-floor cuboidal block is suspended from them and it contains the main space of permanent and temporary exhibitions and operational spaces. Reinforced concrete slabs are visible from below and above, while the walls, with

² After 300 years of colonialism, Brazil gained independence in 1822, and in 1889 slavery was abolished.

³ Cf. inter alia S. Giedion, *Przestrzeń, czas i architektura. Narodziny nowej tradycji*, PWN, Warszawa 1968, p. 8.

⁴ Cf. inter alia M. Skaza, *Trzy miasta i dwanaście przypadków architektury. Uwagi o architekturze współczesnej Brazylii w kontekście uwarunkowań kulturowych* [in:] Skaza M., Twardowski M., *Brazylia. Perspektywy*, Politechnika Krakowska, Kraków 2019.

⁵ Lima draws attention to the variety of issues related to the life and works of Lina Bo Bardi, cf. Z.R. Lima, *An Architect Committed to Life*, “AV Monographs” 2015, no. 180, p. 7.

⁶ For more about this structure see Z. R.M. de A. Lima, *Lina Bo Bardi*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2019, pp. 123–127.

their regular vertical rhythm of two rows, are completely glazed⁷. The building is connected by a vertical circulation shaft with the lower part of the museum, which was hidden on the next two floors below the street level and the entrance square. Lifting the building is not only a sign in space, but also the possibility of shading more than half of the surface area of the public square, which should be considered an additional advantage in these climatic conditions.

The monumental aesthetics of the museum building is the result of an idea that allowed the combination of an engineering design with a spatial structure. Its clarity dominates the formal language of the building, making it unique. The simple composition is also emphasised by the expressive colour of the reinforced concrete frames and the reduced use of materials⁸.

The avant-garde thinking about the museum space reaches its climax in the clear span exhibition interior on the second-floor level. This is because Lina Bo Bardi adopted an avant-garde approach to arranging the exhibition space. Individual works are displayed not on walls, but on concrete pedestals; the paintings were hung on glass panes placed on these pedestals⁹. In this way, the traditional model of the museum was questioned, the model in which the visitor is led along the suggested path imposed by the order and arrangement of works in successive rooms. Describing this arrangement, the MASP team indicates that:

The architect's radicality is also present in the glass display easels created to show the collection on the building's second floor. [...] In MASP's spacious picture gallery, the suspended and transparent exhibition design allows the public to engage in a closer relationship with the collection since the visitor can choose his or her own path among the artworks, move around them and see their backs.¹⁰

3. SESC POMPÉIA

Today, there is much talk about public participation, and even slogans about the world without architects appear. And yet, in the 1970s, when the implementation of SESC¹¹ Pompéia (Centro de Lazer Fábrica da Pompéia) began, initiatives of this type could have been considered unusual, even avant-garde. Commenting on the SESC Pompéia design, Lina Bo Bardi said it was a socialist experiment¹². Erected between 1977 and 1986, the centre was already an experiment at the implementation stage that is still continued, proving the validity of the concept.

⁷ It should be noted that this idea develops the unexecuted project of Lina Bo Bardi – Museum on the seashore, from 1951.

⁸ It should be noted that the frames were painted red only in 1991. Between 1996 and 2001, the management of the museum introduced extensive and controversial changes. In addition to the necessary general renovation of the building, an architect and the former director of the museum, Julio Neves, ordered the replacement of the original floor, the installation of a second lift, and the replacement of the water pools around the square with flower beds.

⁹ Cf. inter alia *Examining Lina Bo Bardi's Exhibition Design at São Paulo's Museum of Art*; <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/lina-bo-bardi-exhibition-sao-paulo-museum-of-art> (access: 15.09.2022).

¹⁰ <https://masp.org.br/en/about> (access: 16.05.2022).

¹¹ SESC is a non-governmental organization, created in the 1940s to provide employees with health services and with sporting and cultural activities. See: <http://www.sesc.com.br> (access: 15.09.2022).

¹² Cf. M. Ferraz, *The Making of SESC Pompéia*, <http://linabobarditogether.com/2012/08/03/the-making-of-sesc-pompeia-by-marcelo-ferraz> (access: 14.04.2022).

For this project, Lina Bo Bardi moved her office to the site. For the next ten years, she, André Vainer and Marcel Ferraz worked directly on the construction site. Marcelo Ferraz points out that: “This approach was a genuine revolution in the *modus operandi* of contemporary architectural practice”¹³. The design was created and modified on an ongoing basis, the progress of works was monitored, and tests (if needed) were carried out in situ, eliminating the barrier between the architect and the implementation. The social nature of this design is also worth mentioning – the programme of the centre created on the spot was constantly modified, changed and adapted to the needs of the residents. The modifications were accompanied by successive phases of architectural implementation. Today, the centre is bustling with life thanks to the crowds visiting this place.

The complex of factory buildings¹⁴ was supplemented with new cubic elements. The brick walls of the halls, covered with shed roofs, are a characteristic element of the centre. Individual spaces of various sizes are distributed on both sides of the internal street leading down into the plot. At the end, it connects with the transverse avenue, together forming the basic traffic core.

The name of the complex is reflected in the functional programme, which includes: a sports complex with a swimming pool and sports courts, gyms, exhibition space, catering (self-service restaurant and café), theatre, library with a reading room, as well as leisure spaces. The programme is complemented with rooms used to organize dance, photography and art classes, as well as a music studio.

In the lower part of the plot, behind the existing factory buildings, new buildings were situated – three concrete towers. The largest of these, a compact cuboid similar to a cube, has five floors, where volleyball, basketball and football courts can be found. In the neighbouring, smaller, twelve-floor tower, there is a café, rooms to do gymnastics, boxing, dance and yoga. The cuboid towers are connected by concrete walkways¹⁵. They are a passageway connecting the two towers at different levels, but also indicate the strip of Córrego das Águas Pretas – a canalised stream that excluded the possibility of building development¹⁶. The bodies of the buildings form a free-form arrangement of elements together with the third, round tower – a sign in the city space¹⁷. All of them were poured in concrete, and the rough texture and imprint of the formwork boards give the impression of austerity, a certain primal, elementary base of the form, devoid of secondary ornamental trace elements. Windows characteristic of the complex are visible against the sand-coloured background of the concrete planes – irregular openings with red bars; this irregularity alludes to the shape of the cave mouths, and the lack of glazing allows ventilation.

The red colour of the bars in the tower windows is also visible in the industrial interiors of factory halls; the elementary nature of architecture was also maintained here – brick walls, reinforced concrete construction structures and steel roof trusses; the walls are unplastered and the details are simple and scarce.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ The first stage of the investment was opened in 1982 – it was the modernization of the Irmãos Mauser factory, which was set up by one of the pioneers of reinforced concrete from the beginning of the 20th century, French François Hennebique.

¹⁵ The use of prestressed concrete made it possible to cover the span of 25 meters between the buildings.

¹⁶ Along this strip free of buildings there is a wooden promenade called *la praia* (beach).

¹⁷ This water tower, 70 meters high, has a characteristic drawing of divisions imprinted in the formwork – it was supposed to be a tribute to the work of Luis Barragán; see: M. Ferraz, *The Making of SESC Pompéia*, *op. cit.*

SESC Pompéia is called “a citadel of freedom, a dream of civic life made real”. The most important value of the architecture of the centre remains its social overtones. They serve to experience not only architecture, but perhaps above all – interpersonal bonds, activities taking place not so much between words, but between buildings. It is a proof of the role given to this architecture by Lina Bo Bardi: “Architecture for me is to see an old man or a child with a full plate of food walking elegantly across our restaurant, looking for a place to sit at a communal table”¹⁸.

4. TEATRO OFICINA

When considering the avant-garde, it is difficult not to pay attention to the transformation that took place in the theatre over the course of the 20th century. Looking from the perspective close to the achievements of Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor or Jerzy Gurawski, especially in the spatial context, attention is focused on a small design such as Teatro Oficina, a design by Lina Bo Bardi carried out between 1984 and 1993 in collaboration with Edson Elito¹⁹.

In this case, the task of architecture was not to create an iconic, recognizable building, but to build a place for the theatre that has been in existence since 1958, which has already become a permanent fixture on Brazil’s cultural scene²⁰. The avant-garde nature of performances required space that would allow for their existence and, at the same time, for freedom of expression and greater interaction (also with the audience). The answer to the experimental theatre was the street character of the space, already proposed in the initial (not implemented) sketches of Lina Bo Bardi. According to her, the theatre space is a kind of extension of the street, and despite the fact that it is placed perpendicularly – it is an “extension” of the street.

The theatre building covers the entire area of a narrow plot (approximately 9m x 50m) which is perpendicular to Jaceguai Street. It is two floors high from the front, and the character of the entrance façade resembles a car repair shop rather than a cultural centre. In fact, the difference in levels between the street and the street stage is as much as 3m, so the two levels are connected by a long ramp. The theatre space is about 12 metres high, and five levels were designed within it.

The two-floor front extends in all directions into the plot between the surface of the ramp and the shed roof that covers the whole. The existing elements merge and intermingle with the newly designed ones, creating a kind of clear span interior.

The main element of the theatre space are two narrow, longitudinal strips: the stage and walkways for the audience. Performances take place on the lower level of the “walkway”, between the outer glass wall and the scaffolding of the auditorium. The audience watches the performances from four levels (there are 350 seats in total). The lowest one is on the same level as the stage, with a tubular scaffolding structure and platforms built above.

The interior may trigger a number of associations, both close and more distant: the street, the interior of a workshop or factory, scaffolding on the construction site. The space created

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Until 1966, the theatre had the shape of an arena between two blocks of auditorium. In 1966, the theatre was completely destroyed by a fire. Preliminary conceptual designs were created with the help of Marcel Suzuki.

²⁰ More about the theatre’s activities can be found on its official website: <http://teatrooficina.com.br/uzyna-uzona/> (access: 15.04.2022).

by Lina Bo Bardi is austere, modest and unobtrusive, almost devoid of details. It remains in the background, creating a place for a man, for the unfolding performance, emphasizing the ephemeral nature of theatrical performances and their avant-garde character.

When describing this design, Lina Bo Bardi refers to the destructive power of the storm, to the need to regroup and rebuild. She draws attention to the need to search for the true meaning of theatre: the physical and experimental structure, reality (non-abstract), which distinguishes this art from cinema or television²¹. As a whole, this design creates a single hybrid structure, as durable as architecture, and at the same time as fleeting as a performance taking place in front of the audience.

This transformation of the theatrical space means changes in the relationship between artists and the audience, as well as blurring the boundaries between actors and spectators. These two worlds, once separated by the frame of the stage, are merged in modern times and allowed to permeate each other. Architecture, that is not only the background for the performance of a theatrical play, not only creates space dedicated to it, but also one where a reaction takes place – the space of interference²².

5. SUMMARY

Just like in the case of styles in architecture, about which we can now say that there is no arbitrarily binding one, we can only notice certain trends in one direction or another. In the case of the avant-garde – a direction belonging to some artistic activities of the early 20th century (also later) – we can identify certain features of architectural creativity that allow us to attribute them to the characteristics of avant-garde art.²³

The analysed designs of Lina Bo Bardi are an experiment each time: a constructional, social or spatial one. Each design is a creative search for new meanings, relationships, new interpretations of the shapes of space frozen in our minds. It should be emphasized that this applies to virtually all of her designs – a residential house, museum, theatre, or a place for sports and recreation... Each time, the gaze of Lina Bo Bardi, seeking not so much originality as novelty, leads to creative discoveries not only in the spatial but also social sphere.

Perhaps some people will treat the attempts to search for avant-garde features in contemporary achievements as a mistake. These purists will claim that this is a term assigned only to the artistic achievements of the early 20th century, which gave rise to expressionism, cubism or dadaism. However, looking from a broader perspective we can say that this “vanguard” has always existed in art. Only those achievements which, by breaking the established patterns, reveal new connections, new interpretations, new spaces, allow art not only to persist but also to change. These changes sometimes lead to development, rarely to evolution, and often they are preceded by a revolution. As these dependencies concern also architecture, they apply as well to the works of Lina Bo Bardi, not only in terms of designs, but also creative attitudes. We not only can, but also should always break the rules!

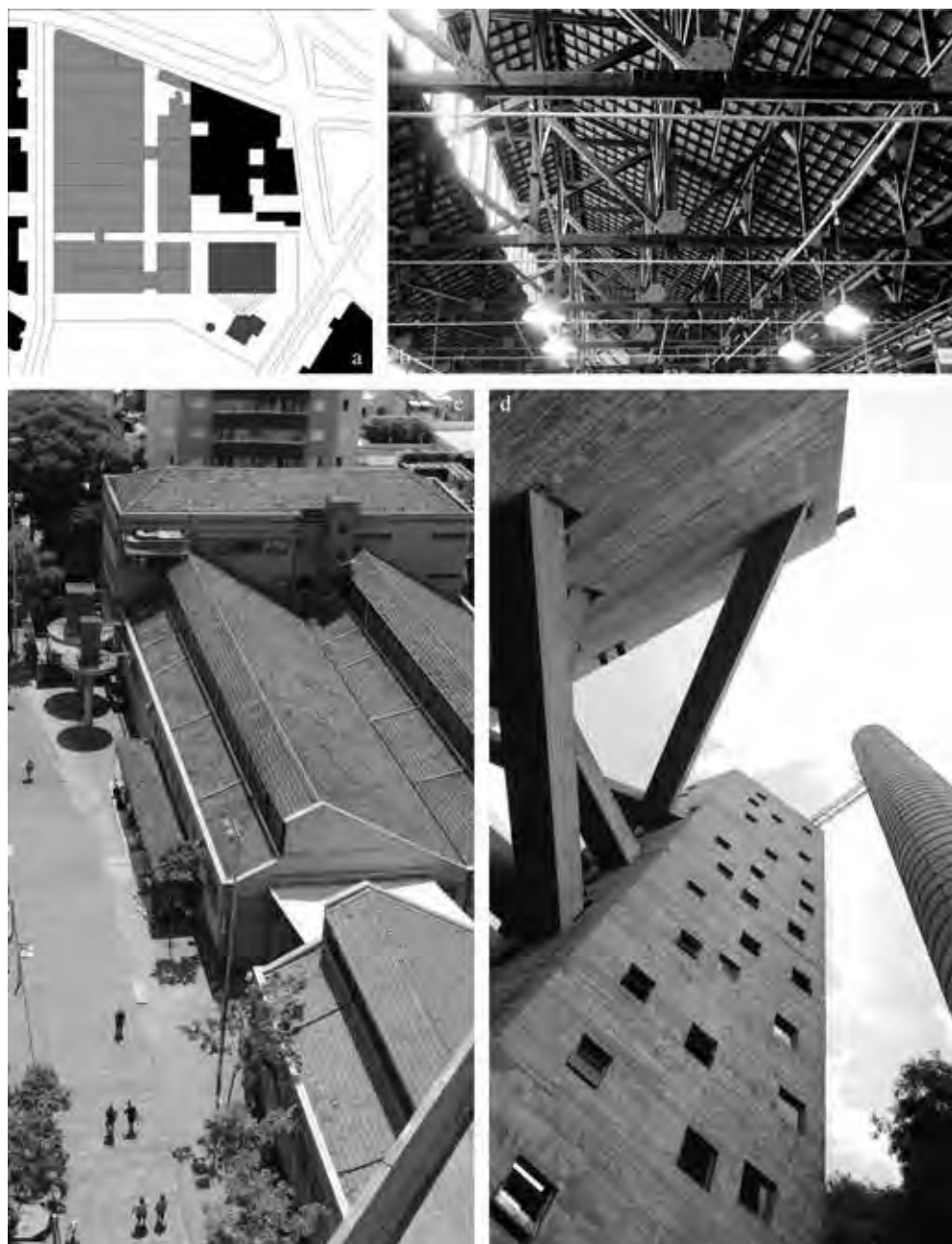
²¹ L. Bo Bardi, E. Edson, J.C. Martinez Correa, *Teatro Oficina = Oficina Theater: São Paulo, Brasil, 1980–1984*, Instituto Lina Bo e P.M. Bardi, Lisboa 1999, cf. 6.

²² Cf. M. Koziński-Woźniak, *Teatr interferencji. Współczesna architektura teatralna a nieformalna przestrzeń teatru*, Wydawnictwo Politechniki Krakowskiej, Kraków 2015, pp. 75–76.

²³ Cf. M. Doorman, *Art. In Progress. A Philosophical Response to the End of the Avant-Garde*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2003, pp. 91–94.



III. 1. Museu de Arte De São Paulo, project L. Bo Bardi, 1957–1968: a. site plan (author's drawing); b. part of the main span (photo M. Skaza, 29.10.2017); c. exhibition in the interior (photo Mike Peel, 8.06.2018, source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MASP_S%C3%A3o_Paulo_2018_08.jpg (access: 15.05.2022); d. general view from Avenida Paulista (photo M. Skaza, 29.10.2017).



III. 2. SESC Pompéia, project L. Bo Bardi, 1977–1986: a. site plan (author's drawing); b. fragment of the structure of the existing factory; c. existing halls and *la praia* lane; d. three new towers (photo M. Skaza, 29.10.2017).



III. 3. Teatro Oficina, project Lina Bo Bardi, 1984–1993: a. site plan (author's drawing); b. view from the neighbouring square on the west facade of the theatre (photo M. Skaza, 3.11.2017); c. interior – view towards the stage (photo N. Kon, no date, source: <https://www.archdaily.com/878754/ad-classics-teatro-oficina-lina-bo-bardi-and-edson-elito>, access: 15.05.2022).

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