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OSCAR NIEMEYER: CLASSICS AND UNSEEN
INSTITUTIONAL

ITAÚ CULTURAL
FUNDAÇÃO OSCAR NIEMEYER
PAÇO IMPERIAL
Some artists go beyond the limits of their own production and become symbols of a time, a place, a feeling. Among the Brazilians of our era, Oscar Niemeyer (1907–2012) stands out as one of those who best represent this originality. His architecture conveys the modern. His lines reveal Brazilianess. His curves and sculptures kindle contemplation and do not go unnoticed.

Niemeyer believed that “life is more important than architecture,” and this is why his works privilege the human side, uniting beauty with functionality. His ideas concerning democracy and social justice also anticipated the current political scene. The architect was committed to favoring the oppressed classes and maintained this attitude until the end of his life, evincing in his work his activism for access to culture and aesthetics.

In recognition of this artist, Itaú Cultural joined Fundação Oscar Niemeyer, and, relying on sponsorship from Itaú Unibanco, carried out the digitalization of 4,800 cataloged original drawings and sketches that belong to Fundação Oscar Niemeyer.

Moreover, it invited curator Lauro Cavalcanti and exhibition-space designer Pedro Mendes da Rocha, both architects, to construct the exhibition *Oscar Niemeyer: Clássicos e Inéditos* [Oscar Niemeyer: Classic and Unseen] – a selection of unbuilt architectural designs and rare materials concerning his classic works, along with photographs and scale models.

The overall set examines Niemeyer’s process of creation and shows his monumental work, allowing for a unique perception of this production while paying homage to Brazilian architecture.

Another aim of the exhibition is to further the institute’s project presenting new artistic expressions to the public, such as architecture, spotlighting people who have played key roles in these manifestations in our country.

This catalog features texts concerning the works shown in the exhibition and constitutes an important reference source for the perception of Oscar Niemeyer’s work’s historical importance.
A WORLD HERITAGE

ANA LUCIA NIEMEYER
President for Fundação Oscar Niemeyer

Fundação Oscar Niemeyer is a not-for-profit institution created in 1988 with the main goal of preserving and fostering awareness about the architect’s work. Its activities began with the receipt of documents produced and accumulated by Niemeyer in his office in the course of his celebrated and influential career.

Fundação Oscar Niemeyer’s collection consists of about 10 thousand architectural documents (blueprints, sketches, technical drawings), 30 meters of textual documentation (correspondence and various texts) and 8 thousand photographic documents, constituting a source of information and research regarding an architecture that was the forerunner of important worldwide trends.

In 2009, the collection was officially recognized by President Lula as being of public and social interest, and it was registered internationally by UNESCO’s Memory of the World Program, an honorary title that distinguishes it as a world heritage.

The sketches, albums and drawings of the architect’s archive are the core of this collection, which includes more than 5 thousand originals. Out of nearly 600 architectural and urbanistic designs, more than 350 are represented in these documents, attesting to their relevance for the memory of modern architecture and urbanism.

The partnership with Instituto Itaú Cultural allowed for the digitalization of these important documents in the collection, which will ensure not only better security and preservation conditions, but also wider access, not only by researchers and scholars in the architecture field, but by the general public as well.

This is the aim of this exhibition, in which, for the first time, Oscar Niemeyer’s legacy is presented under a comprehensive approach.

NIEMEYER’S LEGACY

LAURO CAVALCANTI
Director for Centro Cultural Paço Imperial – Iphan/MinC

The Paço Imperial, a cultural center of the Institute for National Historic and Artistic Heritage (Iphan), has joined with Itaú Cultural and with Fundação Oscar Niemeyer to celebrate the legacy of one of the greatest architects of the 20th Century.

In an exemplary undertaking towards data preservation, unpublished notebooks of drawings and texts were digitalized to broaden the basis for research, without harm to the originals.

The exhibition covers all of Oscar Niemeyer’s oeuvre, with a special focus on some very little-known material. This is a rare opportunity to delve into the production of this Brazilian who changed the course of modern architecture, in an exceptional case in which our visual avant-garde was, at the same time, an international innovation.
ABOUT THE SHOW

LAURO CAVALCANTI
Oscar Niemeyer’s complex and extensive oeuvre is open to multiple interpretations and points of view. Nevertheless, some of its characteristics stand out as essential. The first facet to be underscored is how he foresaw, yet in the early 1940s, the exhaustion of the strict use of rationalism. The second important point is the freedom with which he sought alternatives for this impasse that were consistent with both constructive advances and the principles of the new modernist aesthetics.

“Niemeyer proposed an absolute fusion between structure and architecture. Once the former was executed, the latter was ready.”

In a true Brazilian style, Niemeyer sought inspiration in apparently contradictory sources, such as some works by the young Mies van der Rohe and others by Le Corbusier. The “Miesian” glass curves protecting the internal stairway and the ebony marble partition in the dining room of the Tugendhat House (1928-1930), and the sinuosity of the Friedrichstrasse Skyscraper’s floors (1921-1922) are combined, without conflicts, in the pure and autonomous volumes of Niemeyer’s Swiss Pavilion (1932). By mastering the structural possibilities of the reinforced concrete technology – the only one possible at that time in his country of origin – Niemeyer created a revolution of forms that was simultaneously regional and international.

In order to do so, he proposed an absolute fusion between structure and architecture. Once the former was executed, the latter was ready. This path led him to a refinement and synthesis of his constructions’ elements, which directly impacted the reception of his work, whose forms were readily recognized by everyone, not only specialists. He also produced a paradox, since the concise form is often so predominant as to prevent some observers from perceiving the structural intelligence that allowed for it.

Another important point is his relation with history; although his emphasis was on using the instruments of his time and constructing tomorrow’s past today, the links of his work with the best Brazilian baroque are so obvious they require no description. Niemeyer had an international career. His numerous works in Europe and North Africa show how his spaces were able to generate their own contexts, and to adapt themselves to the existing ones. He was proud of how his works proposed – and provided solutions for – new challenges of construction technology.

THE SHOW

Various exhibitions on Oscar Niemeyer’s constructed oeuvre have been held by the architect himself or by other curators. The purpose of Oscar Niemeyer: Clássicos e Inéditos [Oscar Niemeyer: Classics and Unseen] is different. Without dismissing the path often mixed up with that of 20th-Century architecture, the aim here is to reveal unbuilt designs that remained only on paper, presented now to the public through an extensive work of research and digitalization of the originals. This show became possible thanks to the cooperation between Fundação Oscar Niemeyer and Itaú Cultural.

1 Paulo Mendes da Rocha emphasized this point in his lecture at the event Oscar Niemeyer, um Seminário, held at Itaú Cultural (SP) in December, 2013.

2 See the essay by Glauco Campello, “Arquitetura e Ambiente na Obra de Niemeyer,” produced for the same seminar.
“The aim here is to reveal unbuilt designs that for various reasons remained only on paper, presented now to the public through an extensive work of research and digitalization of the originals.”

CLASSIC WORKS

The sector dedicated to the classic works features photographs and scale models of his emblematic designs while also presenting novelties. Shown for the first time, we have the originals of a set of 20 sketches (illustrations on p. 22-36) prepared in 1998, to be copied and sent to universities all over the country, in order to convey his artistic, political and existential thinking. Also shown for the first time is a series of drawings that Niemeyer sketched on a 12.5 meter roll of paper while he talked about each project for the filming of O Filho das Estrelas, by Henri Raillard (2001). The blueprints for the United Nations (UN) headquarters, with colored-pencil interventions, are the record of a historical moment when Oscar Niemeyer, yielding to the master’s arguments, agreed to not submitting his own project, proposing the fusion with Le Corbusier’s proposal.

UNBUILT DESIGNS

For the most part, the original unbuilt designs³ are taken from notebooks for unexecuted projects. They allow us to see Niemeyer’s methodology, and to follow his way of conceiving, drawing, writing and, in some cases, following-up on the development of his designs. The architect’s work system included the habit of putting visual options in writing. If he met any difficulty of clarity or synthesis, he would return to the board to redesign them, since something was wrong. He called these “necessary explanations.” (Illustration on page 38)

Another custom of his was to speculate on decisions that could be taken for the same project, terrain or site. He would compare the options with the one adopted and cross out the discarded hypotheses with an “x.” Examination of the notebooks opens countless possibilities. It reveals less known facets of his, such as the frank dialogue, in the case of residencies, with a constructive Brazilian tradition. Once the modern was established it was permissible to cite or reproduce good practices of the ample verandas and roofs of our rural architecture. Monumentality can be seen in the sketches of mansions designed for Brussels, Jehdah and Brasilia. (Illustrations on p. 40-46)

His mastery of the small-scale was exercised in the house he designed, in 1938, for Oswald de Andrade, as well as in the circular residence on pilotis, conceived for himself in the 1980s (Illustration on p. 48) and in the dwelling, from 1979, presented to a friend of his about whom only the first name is known: Salim. (Illustration on p. 50)

His drawing sketchbooks allow us to see how he pursued structural formats that often were only realized later, in projects and places different from the original ones. We can follow the constant use of sinuous marquises and ramps that allow for an architectural stroll while reconciling nature and the constructed space as co-participants within the same essence. His preference for the curves allowed by concrete is expressed in structures which are, at different times and in different places, part of the same research aimed at materializing a volume with a given, unique shape. In this sense, it is possible to perceive a line of consistency between, for example, the shell proposed in different decades for the social headquarters of the Jockey Clube Brasileiro in Rio de Janeiro (1976), (Illustration on p. 52), for the General Headquarters of the Army, in Brasília (1968), and for the Auditório de Ravello, in Italy (2000). The curves of Pampulha Church (1940) reverberate their waves in the Aeronautic Technical Center (1947) and, in the following decade, in the annex of Lagoa Hospital (1952).

³ Farès el-Dahdah called my attention to this material, ordered in his research for the organization of a future catalogue raisonné of Niemeyer’s oeuvre.
Bruno Contarini and José Carlos Sussekind, the latter his most constant partner in the last decades. Their shared opinion is that the challenges that Niemeyer presented to them were always founded on an idea with a rigorous structural basis, within the realm of possibility. He continuously experimented with different possibilities of domes: monumental (Oca, Ibirapuera Prk, 1951), upside-down (Congresso Nacional, 1958), sliced (Aquário de Brasilia, 2003), suspended (Catedral Católica along the Caminho Niemeyer, 1997), partially buried (French Communist Party Headquarters, 1965) or with ramps sticking out of them (Museu Nacional de Brasília, 1999/2006).

In the large-scale complexes, the void between the constructed volumes is an expressive element of his architecture, as is the contrast of the prismatic elements with curved volumes that singularize each of the forms invented at different times and in various architectures. The Universidade de Constantine (1969), La Madeleine club, in France (1966), (Illustration on p. 54) and the architectural complex in Ibirapuera Park, in São Paulo (1951), are some of the countless examples of this principle.

Between 1967 and 1979, Niemeyer created the urban design for the cities of Grasse, Dieppe and Villejuif, in France. Special attention is due to his project for Negev, in Israel, (illustrations on p. 56-58) designed in 1964, only three years after the inauguration of the Brazilian capital. It is nearly an “anti-Brasília” insofar as Niemeyer completely removed the protagonism of the automobile, adopted taller buildings as a recourse for a sparser occupation of the land, and established distances between house, work and leisure that can be covered on foot, like in a city of medieval times. The circulation of vehicles was to be limited to a perimeter roadway that would give access to a large Centro Esplanade roadway giving access to a large Centro Esplanade with administrative buildings, a sort of entrance to the city and control point for the distribution of traffic, containing an underground bus station and underground parking for 10 thousand vehicles. The city free of automobiles would be

“served by large, picturesque, tree-lined gravel roads, between which the blocks of dwellings would be located. And the areas of commerce and entertainment would be distributed along the small streets for pedestrians, at

times leading to simple provincial squares, sometimes to grassy fields that precede the residential zones.”

In the 40-floor residential buildings only the entrances, gardens and sanitary installations would be determined. The rest would be flexible, allowing for every sort of variation, including the internal construction in stages. The apartments would have private gardens onto which living rooms and bedrooms would open, in the arrangements that each family preferred. As a “necessary explanation,” Niemeyer underlined that he had designed for Israel a progressivist city that would anticipate the problems of the future in a country “predestined to the solutions of the avant-garde that other – rich and industrialized – nations still refuse.” His hypotheses about a city of the future appears in a drawing for a publication dedicated to his work in the Soviet Union in 1975: subaquatic dwellings, new aerial transports, and sleep learning were just some of the ideas in this curious and rare incursion into the projection of future forms, since his practice normally brought the future into the present.

One of Niemeyer’s few infeasible structural systems is seen in the various versions of the Music Center (1968) (Illustration on p. 60). Initially designed for Flamengo Park, near the Museu de Arte Moderna (MAM), the building was suspended over a central support in a way that allowed a sea view, with a cement framework on the roof, metallic rods and 50-meter cantilevers. Seeking for the proper dimensioning, Niemeyer sought out Italian master Pier Luigi Nervi, who proposed that the concrete beams be substituted by metallic tie bars, a solution adopted in the project’s second variation, meant to be implanted along the shore of Rodrigo de Freitas Lake. In a third stage, the architect himself proposed that it be moved to a plot of land in Barra da Tijuca, a district where, in the 1990s, the Rio de Janeiro City Government wound up realizing the design by Christian de Portzamparc. In 1972, Niemeyer proposed a fourth variation of the project in a cantilevered structure with only two central supports to serve as the Museum of Knowledge, the main attraction of an international fair slated to be held.

4 “Explicação necessária,” archives of Fundação Oscar Niemeyer.
that year, in the same Barra da Tijuca. In that version, there were to be five floors set atop another in order of increasing size, like an inverted staircase, suspended by rods held by the roof’s concrete framework. (Illustrations on p. 62-64)

NIEMEYER IN SÃO PAULO

A very special link connects Oscar Niemeyer with São Paulo. Not counting the architectural complex at Pampulha, his first large public works to be executed in São Paulo were built in 1951: the complex at Ibirapuera Park (1951) and the Copan Building (1951), the first megastructure within the urban fabric. These projects were essential in the sense of exercising a large-scale language, later applied in Brasília.

Rio de Janeiro is the place that possesses most of the projects by Niemeyer. The majority of them, ranging from mid- to small-scale, are scattered throughout the city and do not make themselves felt in the urban fabric, with the late-coming exceptions of the Passarela do Samba and the Niteroi architectural complex in the 1990s. Long before, the curves of the mountains and the loved woman had lent logical yet surprising configurations to the marquees of Ibirapuera Park, and to the sinuous shape of the Copan Building; in 1987, more than 30 years later, those same curves appeared in the Memorial da América Latina. It seems peculiar that some of the incontestable symbols of São Paulo were designed on the drawing board of this architect from Rio de Janeiro.

Here, we have gathered a series of projects for the state of São Paulo in the period from 1938 to 1990. Concomitantly with his activity with Lucio Costa, on the Brazil Pavilion in New York (1939) and on the Ministry of Education and Health, in Rio de Janeiro (1936), Niemeyer sketched a country house that is thrilling for its radicality and straightforward lines. These were followed, to name a few, by the designs for the Aeronautics Technical Center (1947), the Clube dos 500 (1950), and the Duchen Factory (1950), unfortunately destroyed. The unbuilt designs include a 1989 version of the Auditório Ibirapuera, very different from the one that was finally constructed in 2002.

In the design that he made in 1979 for the headquarters of the Companhia Energética de São Paulo (Cesp), (Illustrations on p. 66-70) on two plots at the intersection of Alameda Ministro Rocha Azevedo and Rua São Carlos do Pinhal, we can follow his reasoning in the sense of re-creating a less occupied urban space open to air and sunlight. The architect examines various hypotheses and winds up choosing a high, slender tower for the offices, with an esplanade, covered by terraces and gardens, which would link it to the independent blocks for services and the operational control center, providing green areas in the free space on the ground. In order to better visualize the positive impact that the solution would have given to this part of the city, a digital model of the design is available at the exhibition.

Besides the commissioned memorials and cultural centers, Niemeyer’s designs for São Paulo in the last years gave him the opportunity to propose changes in the context to confront the densification of the Brazilian urban centers, of which São Paulo serves as an extreme example. They also gave him the chance to encourage the creation of bucolic spaces (Illustrations on p. 72-74) in less privileged and forgotten areas, suggesting that the city’s outskirts be replanted with wooded groves integrated to large complexes for culture, sport and leisure.

ON: Clássicos e Inéditos involved a long process aimed at preserving the collection, digitalizing it to allow for immediate research and its future consultation for a greater number of scholars. A seminar, gathering key figures from various generations, not only laid out the basic lines for deeper study in order to prepare the exhibition, but also went beyond it, leading to the autonomous publication of their ideas.

Oscar Niemeyer invented a way of walking along a unique path whose literal transposition would be impossible, or at least inadvisable. His posture establishes an example to be followed in professional work, in the exercise of citizenship, and in the exploration of innovation possibilities. It is this legacy that we intend to celebrate.

6 Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Marcio Kogan, Glaucio Campello, Ruy Ohtake, Angelo Bucci, Álvaro Puntoni, Ciro Pirondi and Farès el-Dahdah. To them we add the statements by Carlos Lemos and Cecília Stolarski.
Leio e o ângulo reto que me atraí...
Arquitetura é invenção. É por explícitos ter sido obrigado durante muito tempo a justificar
as formas diferentes que fazia.
O espaço arquitetural... Entre colunas; sobre as formas da arquitetura; geométricas, curvas, proporcionando-o... A base do arquiteto, mais como ele mesmo belo amigo e ao povo. - Rilke.

O espaço arquitetural como elemento de construção. Reduzir a enteca e o espaço para uma única maneira de multiplicar.
As vezes o lema permanece, e quando este unesco, a obra surge espontaneamente, sobe no ar como uma flor.

CLASS [ca. 1997]
Fundação Oscar Niemeyer
Mas os programas são diferentes e quando o objetivo é economia a solução caminha, naturalmente, para a repetição e o prefabricado.
Para o arquiteto é bom saber desenhar uma figura, uma passagem, uma flor. Desenhar com a mão, sentir-se mais ligado à natureza fantastica que o cume.
A integração da arte na arquitetura.

Como é poder, um 'título' de maneira e uma 'ponte' em toda a arte.
O racionalismo com suas limitações não experimentou o mundo de formas novas que o concreto armado oferecia e cobriu de cursos a capela da Panfilieta.

ERA A ARQUIVA VERDE MANÍ

CLARO QUE PREFEIRIA CONTINUA
LA MADELEINE CLUB, Pressagny-l’Orgueilleux, France [1966]

Fundação Oscar Niemeyer
HOUSE FOR PHILIPPE LAMBERT, Brussels, Belgium [1976]

Fundação Oscar Niemeyer
During my visit to Saudi Arabia (Jeddah), I was surprised to see that the open areas, patios and verandas were well-ventilated. Only living rooms and bedrooms were air-conditioned. Temperature differences between them and the exterior being extremely high. Consequently, in the main characteristic of any residence, i.e., integration of the living areas to green space was lacking there.

We suggest a solution that solves the problem; a house built around an interior, air-conditioned garden with abundant vegetation and a fountain. It is the nature inside the house, a different, more human and pleasant house. The additional spaces, both indoor and outdoor, create a rich environment contributing to the well-being of the inhabitants. This patio will be the most important element and its main feature. In the rest of the house it will be a logical and functional residence. At the ground floor there are the hall, living rooms, dining room, and living room, all of them opening to the patio. The kitchen, located on the left side, is directly connected to the hall and to the above mentioned rooms as well as to the swimming pool. At the upper floor, surrounding the patio open space, there are the main suite (dining room, sitting room, private bedroom and 2 bathrooms) 4 bedrooms and 3 bathrooms - a sitting room opening to the swimming pool below.
HOUSE IN JEDDAH, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia [undated]

Fundação Oscar Niemeyer
HOUSE FOR SEBASTIÃO CAMARGO CORRÊA, Brasilia, DF, Brazil [1986]

Fundação Oscar Niemeyer
NIEMEYER’S HOUSE, Cabo Frio, RJ, Brazil [undated]

Fundação Oscar Niemeyer
Flora é uma casa colonial, mas bem brasileira: tudo acamado, de branco, com barba de porco e telhas caídas. A sala de estar, além da sala de jantar, dá para a varanda e para o pátio interno, mais íntimo e protegido. Os quartos não são muito, mas sim que dê uniforme e o próprio teto de telhas. Como a varanda se estende para abrigar o caixeiro, a casa vai passar mais horizontal. Como vai viver caso de fadiga.

Rio, 20/12/1979

Oscar Niemeyer

**HOUSE FOR SALIM, unknown place [1979]**

Fundação Oscar Niemeyer
RIO DE JANEIRO HORSE RACE COURSE, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil [1976]

Fundaçao Oscar Niemeyer
LA MADELEINE CLUB, Pressagny-l’Orgueilleux, France [1966]

Fundação Oscar Niemeyer
Oscar Niemeyer: Classics and Unseen

Lauro Cavalcanti

For the region is forecast for a few years hence.

1. The larger plan or we call to make it integrative man in
   the steps of his ancient Mediterranean cities which he designs,
   even while walking from home to work, to school, to recreation.
   as without the problems of danger as presented by traffic,
   to-day and without the loss of comfort provided by the may
   store age (drawing). The case is ready to carry him wherever
   he wishes to all sections of the city (drawing) which is contained in
   a village park, without asphalted roads which the urban
   plan eliminates. These are replaced with large cobblestone
   round tracks, picturesque and lined with trees, between them
   are found the dwelling blocks (drawing). The city contains 10
   commune and recreation are distributed between narrow
   streets reserve for pedestrian which 15 to 20 square meters
   square yard or to areas lying before the residential zone (draw
   in). All this, rigorously adapted to the criteria of car
   solution around which the project is created.

2. The coming of the Negev plan is new and well defined.
   At the same time, commerce, recreation, buildings, are located in the
   center. Around these are the dwelling units and all these units
   are, in nature, rectangular, the health and sport areas, the school
   in the surroundings which constitute the concentration of the plan (draw
   in).
Oscar Niemeyer: Classics and Unseen

Fundação Oscar Niemeyer

Oscar Niemeyer

58

NEGEV CITY PLAN, Negev Desert, Israel [1964]

LAURO CAVALCANTI

oscar niemeyer: classics and unseen
MUSIC CENTER, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil [1968]

Fundação Oscar Niemeyer
BARRA 72 EXPO MUSEUM, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil [1969]

Fundação Oscar Niemeyer
BARRA 72 EXPO MUSEUM, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil [1969]

Fundação Oscar Niemeyer
Explicações necessárias:

São Paulo, como todas as cidades deste país, espera em seu crescimento incontrolado, o efeito do
luto incontrolado. É como se a cidade não se fizesse mais humano e corrompê
seus órgãos e milhões, reduzindo os espaços, tornando os espaços livres que ainda existiam, enxugando
os homens e a própria escala.

A ideia de continuar tudo isso, de recorrer ao espaço
urbano, de fazer que o homem e a cidade
de sejam um pouco e, no fundo, o pensamento
de todos e sua arquitetura. Consciente de que não
se pode reduzir a escala de suas edificações mais
de alto, dar aos apartamentos correspondentes e que os
campus urbanos, a própria finalidade
de cidade vertical.

Numa noite está feito e somente solução possível
pode ser amarrar, pois e porque, se a ideia de espaço
mais fraco, mesmo grande, como é importante com
esquema de todos.

O centro para a cidade do "Capo" é um
problema, como uma não resolver no momento,
este texto explicativo.

Tanto de ser um terrível déficit de imagem...

Fundaçao Oscar Niemeyer

COMPANHIA ENERGÉTICA DE SÃO PAULO | HEADQUARTERS | 1ST DESIGN, Sao Paulo, SP, Brazil [1979]
oscar niemeyer: classics and unseen

LAURO CAVALCANTI

Oscar Niemeyer: Classics and Unseen

COMPANHIA ENERGÉTICA DE SÃO PAULO | HEADQUARTERS | 1ST DESIGN, Sao Paulo, SP, Brazil [1979]

Fundação Oscar Niemeyer
mais pendente, mais acenúscia, como se esperasse. É a sede da "leis" mais importante, denteando no conjunto, curvada de arco, verdade por as estruturas dos seus complementos constituírem uma janela escravizada. É a solução mais econômica e mais compacta, mais ligada aos problemas de São Paulo, que este becoção como condição fundamental, a solução aberta, o espaço mais, que sua pesquisa ortogonalmente ineficaz do ensaio.

Rio 20.2.79. Oscar Niemeyer
CENTER FOR CULTURE, SPORTS AND LEISURE, Sao Paulo, SP, Brazil [undated]

Fundação Oscar Niemeyer
An architect and visual artist, he directed Oscar Niemeyer’s office in São Paulo and participated in the project for the creation of Ibirapuera Park. Full professor at the College of Architecture and Urbanism of the Universidade de São Paulo (FAU/USP). Member of the Brazilian Committee of the International Council of Monuments and Sites (Icomos) and of the Brazilian Committee of Art History. He has authored various books, including Ramos de Azevedo e seu Escritório (Editora Pini, 1993), awarded the Prêmio Jabuti.
On a certain day in the early 1960s, I received a visitor at my office who brought a note from Oscar Niemeyer, addressed to me, stating the following:

“The bearer of this note is the German architect Bresman, who was sent to Brazil by the city government of Berlin. He has come to São Paulo to see some architectural works. Of mine, I would like him to visit Ibirapuera Park, since the others do not interest me. Actually, I do not consider them my works. I ask you once again to help him in his desire to see São Paulo. I think that he could visit Bratke’s house and whatever else you consider suitable. I am indebted to you, which makes me feel very uneasy since I owe you many attentions, but one of these days, when you least expect it, I’m going to come bursting in to see you there in São Paulo.

Warm regards, Oscar.”

In this message, he did not consider as his own the works he had designed for the Banco Nacional Imobiliário. If they were not his, whose were they? Intrigued, I even thought that he was referring to me, since, as his representative and aide heading up his office in São Paulo, I could have been held responsible for that failed production. And I soon remembered his celebrated statement in Módulo magazine, in 1958, in which he justified himself in a mea culpa, repudiating his works “after an honest and cold process of review of my work as an architect.” He alleged the existence of too many neglected projects, an exaggerated tendency for originality, and not enough attention given to correction and rationality. Actually, it was not quite like that; problems were due to an excess of setbacks inherent to professional practice; mishaps arising from various origins, including personal ones in his creative processes as well as external or universal ones at the time his designs were materialized.
In his note, Oscar should have written: “I no longer consider them my works.” This “no longer” is essential, because there were rarely any lapses due to inattention in the project’s conception or in the execution of the architectural drawings, always made with the utmost care. Specifically, there were designs by Oscar Niemeyer that left our office and suffered corrections or alterations during the construction process due to legal, circumstantial, and, especially, economic reasons.

In this text, my major concern is precisely to “explain” what happened with Oscar’s projects in São Paulo – those commissioned by the above-mentioned bank, and later by the Companhia Nacional de Investimentos (CNI) and then by Bradesco. There were five buildings. Besides these projects, undertaken between 1950 and 1952, there were two others: the design for Ibirapuera Park, commissioned by the city government, also in 1952, and the design for the Memorial da América Latina, in 1987, commissioned by the state government. In the course of those last 60 years, certainly there were a few projects lacking great significance that Oscar carried out for various clients. I remember, for example, the building for the Instituto de Resseguros, on Avenida São João, and the Hospital da Gastroclínica do Professor Edmundo Vasconcelos, on Avenida Rubem Berta. I also remember the country house of then governor Orestes Quércia, painted in colors that I chose by full powers vested in me by Oscar, in 1989.

The commissions extended to Oscar Niemeyer by the Banco Nacional Imobiliário, headed up by federal congressmen Orozimbo Otávio Roxo Loureiro, to create designs in São Paulo, came at a time of peak demand for middle-class housing. This heightened need was due to a series of circumstances put into motion by the famous Crash of 1929. After this tragedy, which brought the coffee industry to a grinding halt, nearly all the plantation owners had to survive exclusively on the rents of the properties they had built up between the seasons during the times of plenty. Each with his quantities of real estate remaining from the bankruptcies. Ten years later, World War II broke out, and the use of reinforced concrete as a building material was suspended. Judicial suits between landlords and renters were intensified. The year 1942 saw the enactment of the Tenancy Law by Getúlio Vargas, the landlords’ executioner. In short: as always, the rich, especially those involved with commerce and industry, never suffered housing problems, while the poor built their own dwellings, giving rise to the first favelas. Between these two social classes, the middle class was powerless, with nowhere to live. After the 1945 armistice, the economic horizon of the auspicious postwar years led to large-scale undertakings supported by the accelerated production of the steel mills of the Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional de Volta Redonda, allowing for a new boom in reinforced concrete, ushering in the beginning of the city’s verticalization, with the construction of apartment buildings, to the middle class’ joy.

As more condominium apartments were built, the populace came to fully accept this mode of dwelling. This novelty also brought, however, obscure points in its legal aspects and various questions and obstacles in the municipal legislation, mainly in the Código de Obras [Works Code]. At that time, there was no consumer research in the sense of finding out what would best satisfy popular demand, in terms of apartment floor-plan area (prices), number of rooms and bedrooms, etc. The location was also fundamentally important, and two regions were soon considered as prime: the downtown and Avenida Paulista.

Oscar Niemeyer’s first design was that of Condomínio Califórnia office building, conceived and designed in Rio de Janeiro before the opening of his office in São Paulo. Its spaces were released into the market in May 1951. Its gallery, which links Rua Barão de Itapetininga to Rua Dom José de Barros, was inaugurated in December 1953, while the rest of the construction was still in the completion stage. The floors of offices are excellent, with perfect lighting and sunlight for the large rooms and the wide hallways leading from the elevators. Common areas are ample in a way that is unthinkable nowadays.

Throughout its 60 years of existence, this beautiful building has faced problems arising from alterations in the character of Rua Barão de Itapetininga; from an elegant street, with ritzy shops in the years of the celebrations of the 4th Centennial, it became a street open only to pedestrians, mainly from the working class, and was largely taken over by street vendors. Clearly, this impacted Galeria Califórnia, especially in regard to the robust V-shaped structural supports, which in the original design stood at a distance from the shop windows. Today, they are hindrances to the structures of popular commerce.
The visible decadence of the entire gallery has arisen from more than a half-century of maintenance totally at odds with the architect’s aesthetic intentions.

The second construction was an apartment building, the Montréal, built on the corner of Avenida Ipiranga with Avenida Casper Líbero. In those days, it was a surprising 20-story building, still planned and designed in Rio, in 1951. Its imposing beauty, which charmed everyone, consisted in how Niemeyer managed to visually isolate it from the adjoining buildings, designing the brise soleil to descend vertically along the edge of the building’s free-standing tower, not in the part where the building is joined to its neighbors. The Montreal was delivered in January 1954, during the festivities of the city’s 4th Centennial, and was featured on the cover of the commemorative issue published by Folha de S.Paulo newspaper, in which appear the photographs of Niemeyer and Prestes Maia, president for CNI, the successor of Loureiro’s bank.

The third condominium was the Eiffel Building, on the corner of Avenida São Luís and Rua Marquês de Itu. It is the construction that Oscar appreciated the most; its duplex apartments are excellent, and in this case the architect once again masterfully treated the question of setting off the building from the adjoining ones beginning at the 10th floor. Not as high as the rest of the building, the two lateral wings flex forward to create a sheltering space, embracing the elevated garden located on the roof of the mezzanine above the projecting ground-floor. Originally, this garden above the lower area of stores had ample access through the salon, which was bought by the São Paulo Chess Club as soon as the building’s spaces were released into the market. By the condominium rules, this association had the right to use the garden freely, having access exclusivity, although it was not the owner, since the place was obviously a common area. It just so happened that the chess players sold the large salon to a restaurant, which increased its floor area, covering part of the elevated garden. When the resident who lived in the first-floor apartment opened his window, he looked out over a roof that blocked his view of what was left of the garden. What’s more, the two owners of the lateral wings’ upper apartments likewise ended up as the “owners” of the respective roof areas, erecting additional structures on them that were not foreseen by the building’s design.

As an unassuming architect, I do not understand the legal issues related to these invasive procedures; I just know that they harmed the design’s overall integrity and deeply regret them. The Eiffel Building was released in 1952 and delivered to its buyers in 1955.

“’The Eiffel Building is the construction that Oscar appreciated the most. In this case the architect once again masterfully treated the question of setting off the building from the adjoining ones.’”

The fourth building planned under the responsibility of Oscar Niemeyer was the Triângulo Building. This name arose from the shape of the available lot: a true island set apart from the other buildings along Rua Direita, in the historical downtown district. It is nothing but a prismatic tower that was originally surrounded by equidistant vanes of horizontal brise soleil, similar to those of the Montréal and the Copan. Aiming to do something different, instead of reinforced concrete, Oscar used a cantilevered metallic structure projecting about one meter, designed to hold aluminum slats with a two-centimeter separation between them. They were blue. Like the Montréal, it was very beautiful. During the first summer something happened that our master did not foresee: the deafening noise made by the rain striking the aluminum slats screwed to the iron braces. The decision was unanimous: a number of months after the inauguration, the building was denuded, the glass windows totally exposed. This truly was a case of oversight by the architect. The Triângulo Building was released to the market in April 1952, like the Eiffel Building, and delivered to the unit owners likewise in 1955, and continues to display the consequences of a negligent aspect of its design – certainly stemming from the promoters – which placed the main gate and access to the elevators in the basement, accessible only by a set of stairs leading down from street level. This made the offices inaccessible to wheelchair users. One of the walls along the stairway bears a nice mosaic by Di Cavalcanti, unfortunately mutilated by the doorjamb of a metallic security door installed in these days of generalized violence.

Last but not least, we come to the Copan Building, and I will inform the dear reader that this name is an abbreviation of Companhia Panamericana de Hotéis e Turismo,
an entity created by Roxo Loureiro, with the aim of participating in the festivities in connection with São Paulo’s 4th Centennial, in 1954. He had the idea to enter into association with a large North American hotel chain to build a mega-construction called the “Copan Touristic Massif,” while retaining the possibility of including a residential complex. After myriad attempts, comings and goings by Loureiro and Americans between the United States and São Paulo, the negotiations concerning the desired 500-room hotel broke down, and so the plan calling for a building with 1,116 apartments with various numbers of rooms, came into effect. The rest of the program continued in place. It was released to the market on May, 24th, 1952.

The Copan Building megalomaniac project brought many frustrations for Oscar, making him repudiate his work in the days that he moved to Brasília, in 1956. He gave me full power of attorney to make any decision that needed to be made. I inherited a series of renouncements. Many years later, when the mishaps were forgotten, I assumed a counterfeit paternity, with many reservations.

When the standard floor plan was finished, with apartments of various sizes and different layouts, it became clear at the time of the calculations for the reinforced concrete that the columns would be completely disordered. At that moment, Oscar Niemeyer opted for a transition slab similar to the one his friend Le Corbusier used in his housing unit in Marseille, a work designed in 1946 and inaugurated in 1952. I believe that he knew about this design, otherwise it was a coincidence. This waffle slab, at a height of 13 meters, allowed all the structural loads to be transmitted to the ground through equidistant pillars. One idea led to the next, and coincidentally or not, our architect imagined a garden beneath this large slab, surrounding all the these columns laid out in a huge “S” pattern. Like the design at Marseille, the idea was to leave the ground level wide open.

Thus, a huge area was left open at Copan for everyone, not only below the apartment block, but extending up to the edge of the lot and also in the front, toward the hotel that was to be accessible by a footbridge. He was therefore envisioning two large public areas: the large ground-level gallery of stores and the elevated garden accessible by a spiral ramp and by escalators coming up from the gallery. This garden, in theory
open to the public, would hold the ticket offices and entrances for the theater and the large cinema, a vast flower shop, small shops in the back, along with small-scale commercial installations like cafés and ice cream shops. There would also be benches for resting, between the planters holding ornamental flora. Everyone, absolutely everyone, supported this idea; the drawings were approved by the city government; the architectural model, made by Zanine, was superb; and in a surprisingly short time everything was sold, except the raised garden, of course. The last certificate of occupancy was requested from the city in 1974, three years after the first condominium meeting, held on June, 29th, 1971, twenty-two years after the beginning of construction.

"For me, the Copan was a great dream that never took place. Or, we could say, dreams by Roxo Loureiro and by Oscar Niemeyer, each with his own. These dreams were incompatible with the pragmatism of the real-estate developers in light of the realities that arose due to the abandonment of the original program."

As soon as Bradesco, the final property developer of the Copan undertaking, assumed its management duties, it faced a complicated challenge to bring together the tenants who were not paying their condominium fees in order to recover available areas according to the contractual penalties and also tried to divide the large apartments into easily sellable kitchenettes. The layouts that resulted from this profit-driven strategy are regrettable, especially regarding the horizontal circulations for accessing the units. That bank also set aside the approximately 4,600-square-meter raised garden, not allowing its use, for many years. From our point of view, this was a common area. It was a useless space in those days, since the theater had not been built and the cinema accesses had been transferred to the ground-floor gallery. It was not until October 1975 that this unused area was sold to Companhia Telefônica Brasileira, which never occupied it. It is currently rented out for offices, for which purpose an elevator was installed in the gallery. The spiral ramp without supports that Oscar Niemeyer wanted turned out to be infeasible and was substituted by a stairway.

Another enormous common area that was left over, with about two thousand square meters, was the one meant for a foyer and the facilities of the unbuilt theater. This free space, situated above the mezzanine of the gallery’s left-wing, was forgotten until 1992, when Bradesco put it up for auction. Its buyer inexplicably kept it in a state of disuse until 2013. Now, accessible through one of the stores, it is being rented.

For me, the Copan was a great dream that never took place. Or we could say dreams; one dreamt by Roxo Loureiro and a different one by Oscar Niemeyer. These dreams were incompatible with the pragmatism of the real-estate developers in light of the realities that arose due to the abandonment of the original program.

II

The second commission extended to Oscar Niemeyer for projects in São Paulo came in late 1951, by way of his friend Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, president of the city’s 4th Centennial Commemorative Commission. This invitation came in the wake of misunderstandings between that renowned Maecenas and Rino Levi as well as with some other São Paulo colleagues in terms of their fees. To the Rio de Janeiro architect there were no problems in that regard. To work with him, he called upon his colleague Hélio Lage de Uchoa Cavalcanti and two São Paulo architects, Eduardo Kneese de Mello and Zenon Lotufo, along with two other collaborators: Gauss Estelita and Carlos Lemos. He would work in Rio, developing preliminary sketches, while his companions in São Paulo would be in charge of elaborating the blueprints to be used in the execution.

In the so-called “vacant lands of Ibirapuera,” which lacked precise borders, the commission was planning to install a large commemorative exhibition consisting of shows alluding to our industrial, agricultural, artistic and intellectual activities, in short, to everything that could be shown to the world in order to amaze everyone about our progress. But there was not a well-defined program of what was needed: buildings for exhibitions, a theater, a place for literary activities, a restaurant. This caused Oscar Niemeyer to hesitate at the beginning, imagining blocks that were diversified in their
Oscar Niemeyer in São Paulo

CARLOS A.C. LEMOS

structural forms like those of Pampulha, designed some years before in Belo Horizonte. This fact is clearly demonstrated in the small publication dating from October 1952 showing the preliminary sketches of the exhibition prefaced by civil engineer Joaquim Cardoso. Due to certain circumstances, however, the size of the area originally allocated for the definitive constructions was reduced to allow space for a large fun park and more dismountable prefabricated pavilions planned to hold popular restaurants and exhibitions to supplement the officially slated ones.

The preliminary sketches were transformed into what stands there today: three buildings for exhibitions, the spherical dome currently called the Oca, and the theater constructed in those years, plus the sprawling marquee, a brilliant solution by Oscar Niemeyer, linking the buildings together. The marquee was a unique touch to personalize Ibirapuera Park. It is, above all, a convergence point for the visitors and a place for getting together during good weather or rainy days.

Niemeyer unified the formal and structural characteristics of the three exhibition buildings; he imagined them with their façades supported by inclined columns resembling angle brackets. I remember well how he explained the idea, saying that those supports would prevent people from walking closely along the façades, as he wanted the accesses to the exhibitions to be located exclusively at the ends of the marquee. He wanted the gardens to come up to the glass walls. None of these ideas were respected; today, all of those constructions are surrounded by sidewalks.

“...The marquee was a unique touch to personalize Ibirapuera Park. It is, above all, a convergence point for the visitors and a place for getting together during good weather or rainy days.”

The three exhibition buildings are truly beautiful, and that of the Bienal de São Paulo is monumental. Indeed, it is longer and wider than Rua Barão de Itapetininga. Its lateral façades are no longer the original ones, due to the construction of the new roof.

Originally, the roof was quite low, due to the existence of two gutters perched atop the rows of columns. The engineer in charge of the reinforced concrete, Gustavo Gam, made them hollow at the request of the architects, so that they could serve as a passage for the rainwater. Upon reaching ground level, this vertical duct was bent at a 90° elbow to direct the water flow to the drain gallery. It turned out, however, that on a certain day of celebration some imaginative people installed a metallic framework on the main façade to hold fireworks that imitated the Iguazu Waterfalls for 15 min. The result: a lot of ash accumulated in the gutters and due to heavy rains it went down and became lodged in the elbow in the foundations and solidified there. No way was found to unclog the obstruction so the roof was changed into one with two slopes, whose peak rose above the height of the lateral façades’ wall. The inevitable repair resulted in the current situation, where the rainwater flows down through exposed ducts.

III

Oscar Niemeyer’s third big commission in São Paulo was for the Memorial da América Latina, a project that originated in Senator Orestes Quércia’s first speeches in 1975, espousing that Brazil pay more attention to its Latin American neighbors instead of aligning itself preferentially with Europe or Africa. As governor, in 1987, always aiming at the integration of the Latin American peoples, he announced the decision to build the Memorial da América Latina as a means of fostering a stronger union of Brazil with its neighbors of Hispanic origins. Niemeyer was then called on to carry out this plan, which he did with a great deal of satisfaction, since this theme also ranked high among his own political concerns.

The architect took up the job, listing the activities to be carried out at the site and, in the company of Darcy Ribeiro he imagined the basic buildings: the Latin America Library, to hold at least 30,000 volumes, documents, films and a collection of regional music; the Salon for Acts, for political events, having as a backdrop the huge panel by Portinari depicting the political life of Joaquim José da Silva Xavier (a.k.a. Tiradentes); the Creativity Pavilion, showing pieces of popular art from all over Latin America; and the...
Brazilian Center for Latin American Studies. Besides these constructions, as a place for periodic exhibitions of his Hispano-American artists, there was the large Simon Bolivar Auditorium (recently decimated by fire), administrative offices and a restaurant.

In this grandiose project, Niemeyer strove to define new forms and structural solutions that came to characterize this Memorial da América Latina. In issue number zero of the magazine *Nossa América*, published by the Memorial, Oscar Niemeyer tells how he arrived at these identifying forms, emphasizing above all a reduction of the architectural elements while demanding the utmost from technique. This desire was consolidated in the support of the buildings’ large curved outer shells on beams to create a huge free span. “All of this was a challenge for the civil engineer. It is very satisfying for the architect to feel that the technique is present, that he can use it fully,” he stated. This juxtaposition of two elements really did result in large, striking spaces of great beauty. The library, for example, has a 90-meter-long beam along its longitudinal axis and three shells are supported by it: the largest one for housing the books, and, on the other side, the smaller shells forming a spatiality as involving as it is monumental. The same configuration is repeated in the Salon of Acts and in the auditorium.

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Certainly, if architecture is also an art, and when aesthetics and technique go hand-in-hand and are blended in its practice, its author arrives at the climax of creation. Oscar Niemeyer Soares Filho achieved this in the works he executed in São Paulo.
Studied at the School of Fine Arts (UFPE) and is a graduate of the Faculdade Nacional de Arquitetura, in Rio de Janeiro. He was a member of Niemeyer’s team from 1957 onwards. He was in charge of the Editora Mondadori project in Milan, Italy. He was president for the Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional (Iphan) and worked on the restoration of Paço Imperial at Praça XV (RJ). Author of O Brilho da Simplicidade: Dois Estudos sobre Arquitetura Religiosa no Brasil Colonial, published by the Departamento Nacional do Livro and Editora Casa da Palavra, in 2001.
The buildings designed by Niemeyer are nearly always set in the urban fabric’s large spaces or even outside the perimeter of cities. Only in a few cases are they inserted on lots within already stratified urban zones. They nevertheless all bear a strong interrelationship with their environment. Not merely in the adaptation or integration of an organic or rational sort, but in the interchange of influences between the new object and the environment in which it is inserted. This can take place in other generic examples of an architectural object’s insertion in a determined landscape or defined urban center. But in the case of Niemeyer’s architecture, the question is often more complex, when not extraordinary and transformative. In the Niemeyerian examples, a dialectic contrast can hold between the object and the urban fabric, between the object and the landscape, or even between the object and the history of that place. And, above all, the new object can create a situation based on which it upgrades the place or activates underlying qualities of the urban fabric or the landscape.

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Whether all of this takes place consciously, or not, is of no artistic consequence. The Copan Building, in São Paulo, is the most notable example of inserting a large built volume whose sinuous shape modifies the urban fabric and, by its simple presence, gives a new configuration to the metropolitan image. In the case of Canoas House, in Rio de Janeiro, construction and landscape are delicately interwoven, giving rise to the creation of spaces and forms which, though not part of nature, could not exist anywhere else. And, based on this marriage, the conditions of the natural setting and the surrounding landscape are upgraded. The granite outcropping enveloped by the sheltering shadow of the extended winding roof is transfigured, becoming house and nature.

In the case of the 1954 design of the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Caracas, which represents an important moment in the development of the architect’s cultural production, it was the topographic conditions that led to the final conception of a simple sculptural form, an upside-down truncated pyramid, able to contain the object’s entire and fully concentrated artistic and rhetorical change, including the situation of being balanced at the edge of a steep slope. Forty years later, the design for the Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Niterói was faced with a similar topographic situation, set on a promontory overlooking Guanabara Bay. This time the solution involved the shape of a wine glass and a winding ramp, in a unique visual dynamics in which the landscape is invited to mandatorily participate in the spectacle of the architecture. These two examples, Canoas House and the Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Niterói, challenged with two different situations of the Rio de Janeiro landscape – one on a mountain, the other along the sea – are emblematic of the architect’s supreme art and his close bond with the country of his birth.

The Mondadori Headquarters, in the outskirts of Milan, with its mannerist lines, evinces the freedom of a series of asymmetric arches, making it an example of the dialectic contrast between the new building, the landscape and the local context. On the Lombard Plain, dotted with the dark-green lines of poplar trees, the headquarters emerges in the landscape, self-aware of its presence and charm. This inevitably reminds us of a Palladian villa, proud of its unexpected appearance amidst the grasslands. This combination of cultural substrate, solemnity and elegance makes the Mondadori Headquarters the most Italian of Niemeyer’s designs for that country. For its part, the 1956 apartment building in Hansa District, Berlin, brought the charm of Niemeyer’s Brazilian architecture to the northern-latitude landscape of a German garden. Today that building stands like an exotic flower, joyfully adapted to the locale. Even though its structure has undergone some modifications, its light and serene image – obtained with the V-shaped pillars and the elegant proportion of its verandas – is a happy note of contrast in that cold and distant park.

In the constructions directly inserted into the cities’ urban fabric, some outstanding examples of Niemeyerian architecture offer a sheltered open area at ground level be-
neath the building perched atop pillars, or subtle implantations that liberate part of the terrain. These situations lead to the creation of spaces with a strictly urban sense, to be freely used, open to all. Since his 1936 design for the Ministry of Education and Health, with the creation of its patios and high pilotis that lend unexpected fluidity to that part of the city; since his proposal for the UN Headquarters in New York, suggesting the creation of a public square open to use by the populace. Oscar Niemeyer’s modernist interventions amid the urban webs of the cities seek to open these democratic spaces that visually transmit the range of activities and functions they offer. And they have often become active places, with an urban life of their own. And they have often become active places, with an urban life of their own. As is the case of the covered public square created by the pilotis of the Ministry of Education and Health, the current Palácio Cap-anema, in Rio, where students gather to make their demands.

“Oscar Niemeyer’s modernist interventions amid the urban webs of the cities seek to open these democratic spaces that visually transmit the range of activities and functions they offer. And they have often become active places, with an urban life of their own.”

Another one of these active sites, whose neutrality makes it the most noteworthy of all, is the marquee of Ibirapuera Park, whose welcoming shade is known to nearly all the city’s inhabitants, who enjoy and use it in a wide variety of ways. Besides transforming and enriching the landscape with its ample protection, this marquee, created with the aim of functioning as a covered link between the park’s buildings, serves not only as a refuge for the park’s visitors, providing shelter for various uses, but also as a striking element in the collective imaginary. Beyond the experiences they foster, the architecture’s spaces have this virtue that they can be renewed, with different narratives and meanings, in thought and memory.
In some cases, however, the constructions and the spaces they create are designed to host large crowds and extraordinary activities. This is the case of the Sambódromo, in Rio de Janeiro, whose specificity and symbology were spectacularly captured by Niemeyer’s architecture. To the point where the raw materiality of its structure in reinforced concrete is illuminated and transfigured at the culminating moment of its use, that is, at the time of Carnival parades. At those moments, the baroque retables of the Carnival floats and all of the costumed people dancing in the parade arena and on the steps of the bleacher seats become part of the architecture itself. It is an architecture of the public square, of the theater and the street. Besides serving to host shows and other sorts of spectacles enjoyed by crowds, the Sambódromo’s architecture is outstanding for possessing another uniquely Niemeyerian trait in regard to its use during the long intervals of time between the spectacles, when the parade arena is empty and quiet, remaining in a latent state, silently re-echoing the festive moments. In these intervals between one Carnival and the next, the spaces below its bleachers can also be used as public schools. This beneficial detail suggested by Darcy Ribeiro fosters an integration with the city life and its popular soul.

In this analysis of Niemeyer’s works, there are other examples that stimulate its reanimation and the elaboration of new narratives. This is the case of the Havre Cultural Center, in a public square set below the level of the surrounding terrain to protect it from the cold wind buffeting the wharves of the Mancha Canal, in Normandy, where the circular forms of white cylindrical volumes emerge with curved walls that sprawl out over the ground. This autonomous urban space within the city’s urban fabric is characterized by the neoclassical uniformity of its linear, gray constructions of reinforced concrete. The contrast is dramatic. The interface between the new architectural artifact and the environment is transformative. After having been devastated by the war, the city reconstructed by Perret is no longer the same gray and cold place of yesteryear, and the new luminous and surreal urban space that has arisen in it is from another time or perhaps another dimension of reality. It is disquieting, but full of promise. Even though it is from the future and from another reality, that public square offers a program of cultural activities with places for sheltered shops and cafés, and it is often used in a concrete way by young people who cannot resist the temptation to
skate on the surfaces of its curved walls, sidewalks, ramps and bulwarks. By contrasting so strikingly with the surroundings, the Havre Cultural Center transforms the city, enlivening its soul, establishing a bright and charming transition between the sea and the historic urban center. The typical Niemeyerian composition of the architectural volume in startling contrast with a more neutral background is repeated at Havre, where the new constructions stand out against the backdrop of the old skyline.

A project for the Universidade de Brasília (UnB), the Instituto Central de Ciências, whose construction began in 1963 and was only partially finished, also offers different scenarios and narratives in its galleries, stimulating our imagination. Niemeyer wanted the concrete surfaces with the shapes of his architecture to be dictated by the technological demands of each of the environments of scientific research and experimentation. They were to arise in the garden, between the two nearly 700-meter-long curved wings, along which the university’s science schools were to be aligned. But this did not take place. The pre-molded structures of the basic framework’s two wings were completed, but the construction stopped there. The pergola segments of the center garden did not arise, neither did any construction with a special character between the two wings. Nor was the occupation of the complex limited to the program of activities linked to science in the university context. Furthermore, some of the science institutes and courses established their headquarters in autonomous units, scattered around the university campus. They counteracted the program that was already physically configured by the construction – rigorously planned by architect João Filgueiras (a.k.a. Lelé) – of the building’s two pre-molded wings conceived by Niemeyer, which the students nicknamed the Minhocão [Big Worm]. The basic nature of the activities that were eventually installed there, however, was the same as what had been planned. And in this text, this is what interests us. What we want to underscore is the vivacity of the shared social experience created by the extensive galleries to the east and west of the long garden that runs along the axis of the construction envisioned by Niemeyer, with Lelé’s collaboration. Due to its large size and freedom, the space of the galleries takes on an urban scale and, at the same time, induces the users to see themselves as part of a group in which differences are freely exercised, without hierarchies. The gallery is a street but also a shelter. Sometimes it is pervaded by the specific meaning of certain activities, similar to the street, but also like an indoor space. Here is the part that corresponds to the school of chemistry, there is the sidewalk of the bookstore, over there is the atrium of the auditorium, etc. The gallery is a path and place of encounter, it is a place for walking but also has multiple differentiated spaces with high plant beds, forming small public squares. Since it is a veranda alongside an extensive garden, I can even sit there in a group of students and professors, next to the flower beds to rest, talk, discuss, argue and learn.

It is the shared space of university life. In a city without streets or corners, Oscar made a covered street arise at the heart of the Universidade de Brasília, a gallery which in a certain way reminds us of the peripatetic school of Aristotle’s Lyceum. This ability to impregnate architectural substance into each part or simple component of the objects he designed is present in the solitary and commonplace marquee of straight and broken lines that dynamize the space of the public square called Praça Juscelino Kubitschek, at the seaside, as part of the overall set of works known as the Caminho Niemeyer, in the city of Niterói. There, suddenly, without the lyricism inherent to the winding marquee of Casa do Baile, in Pampulha, nearly barren, we find once again the miracle of generating an enticing space, of pure conviviality, with a zig-zagging strip of concrete resting atop pilotis, extending above a large paved square.

A program of constructions for public activities is planned for the Caminho Niemeyer, along the shore of Guanabara Bay, in Niterói – in opposition to the gardens by Reidy and Burle Marx, on the other side of the bay, on the beaches of Rio. Along the path, the new buildings, either forming small groups or isolated, as in the case of the Museu de Arte de Niterói and the Museu do Cinema, are always located amid barren, stark public squares. The works brought together there, some already finished and others in the completion stage, reveal Niemeyer’s late style, which underscores his tendency to concentrate the design on a unitary form, constituted by an undulating sheet of concrete or simply by a dome, complemented by ramps, marquees and reflecting pools, which are rhetorical elements of this simple yet equally dense and concise architecture.

The same stark public square is repeated in Brasília on the concrete esplanade that is home to the Museu de Arte and the Biblioteca Nacional. It also features two circular
reflecting pools, in deference to the city’s dry climate, but the empty space remains, along with the unimpeded view of the buildings. The dome of the Museu de Arte has a ramp suspended around it, like a ring of Saturn, which provides an aerial walk above the Esplanada dos Ministérios. The inclined plane that gives access to the building, stretching in a straight line from the ground up to the entrance, reinforces the archaizing tendency that over the years gained force in Niemeyer’s vocabulary. In these squares surrounding the dense unitary forms with an accentuated archaizing tendency, reassumed during the architect’s phase, the great voids of Brasília are repeated, as they are at Praça dos Três Poderes. The voids of Brasília were created to be filled with civic manifestations, as indeed they have been, and in the intervals between these special moments their silent spaces retain the memory of those events along with a perennial feeling of solemnity. In the public squares designed for cultural centers and leisure, the wide-open spaces between the built volumes are also surprising. They retain the memory of festive moments and are essential for the enjoyment of the onerous and atemporal mood inherent to Niemeyer’s architectural complexes and objects.

“The voids of Brasília were created to be filled with civic manifestations, as indeed they have been, and in the intervals between these special moments their silent spaces retain the memory of those events along with a perennial feeling of solemnity.”

These voids help to establish the explicitly surrealist character of the palaces and the pure geometric volumes from which the Niemeyerian complexes are composed. Moreover, in some cases they are spaces that do not even need to be penetrated in order to be emotionally felt. The large void between the Palácio da Alvorada and the protective reflecting pool, where the tourist or passerby must pause to admire the chief of state’s residence – from a distance and under the radiant light of that mirage – adds a set of seemingly unexpected attributes to that ethereal, mildly solemn, shimmering and distant image. The large aquatic garden that reflects the arches and columns that encircle the Palácio do Itamaraty, compelling a respectful distance between the building and the passerby, also configures one of these voids and is, therefore, an expressive architectural element that indicates the classic vigor with which that palace was conceived, designed for grand receptions and official events of an international nature.

At the Mondadori Headquarters, in Milan, it is the void of the Lombard Plain that is incorporated into the architectural composition. There, this void is represented by the ground of the surrounding prairie, which, extending to the faraway horizon, passes alongside the reflecting pool under the glass prism suspended by the columns. The voids present in the large compositions, especially after Brasília, are even more pre-emptory in the architect’s late style, when the unity of the pure geometric volumes, the simplicity and the conciseness of its archaizing forms are accentuated.

In regard to Niemeyer’s late style, with the simplification and densification of the compositions in pure, atemporal geometric solids – able to express the peculiarities of the programs they house and to express with simplicity the symbolic and poetic charge which they carry in and of themselves – a noteworthy example is the new design for the Auditório Ibirapuera, presented 50 years after the architect’s first, unexecuted proposal. The same theme and the same wedge shape were reassumed with great expressivity, but unlike the initial solution, the design evinced, live, the process of the architect’s evolution. In the first solution, when the concern for lightness predominated, the triangular wedge was supported on the plane of the ground only along one edge of the prism. It was held in balance by inclined pillars connected to the ramp leading to the foyer, in an architectural set of great aesthetic power. The image of this object, touching the ground only along one of its edges, was light and surprising.

“Niemeyer’s architecture began to express itself, in his late phase, through a concise synthesis and a simple geometric shape, contaminated by archaisms and a great deal of density, without, however, losing its light and enchanting attributes.”
ITAMARATY PALACE, Brasilia, DF, Brazil [1962]

photo: Michel Moch | Fundação Oscar Niemeyer
But that charming expression was left aside 50 years later. The same volume was extended prone on the ground, and even so, it continued to be as light as a feather, since, due to its abstract configuration, its white walls appear diaphanous. The squiggly crimson marquee that marks the entrance to the theater’s internal spaces is the current version’s only rhetorical element. The stage was democratized, with an opening at its back that, when opened, allows it to also be viewed by outdoor audiences. The space around the new volume was thus expanded. Everything became simpler, lighter, more concise, and simultaneously unexpected.

“Everything is happening in face of the void that is offered to be filled, even though this cannot be done, except metaphorically, under penalty of breaking the set’s scenic balance.”

It must be observed that when the evolution of technique and the rise of new materials allowed the more notable examples of contemporary architecture to use free forms almost completely linked to the desires of each artist and the impulses of each individual temperament, Niemeyer’s architecture began to express itself, in his late phase, through a concise synthesis and a simple geometric shape, contaminated by archaisms and a great deal of density, without, however, losing its light and enchanting attributes.

In this period, Niemeyer’s architecture emphasized the confrontation between the architectural object and the cities’ urban fabric, or the landscape, or simply the environment where the object is inserted. Perhaps this is due to how configurations – sometimes with a clearly surrealist character, since the palaces of Brasilia, sometimes with the archaizing sense of domes and pure geometric volumes since the Oca at Ibirapuera Park and the Museo de Caracas – include the surrounding void in their formal conception and poetic expression. A void that is constituted on the basis of architecture, and which, in the case of Brasilia, extends endlessly into the vastness of the surrounding savanna landscape. This void, as an architectural entity, cannot be separated from the environment from which it emerged. Thus, rather than the new object or the set of objects being adapted to either the urban fabric or the landscape, it is the urban framework or the natural environment that is adjusted to the architecture, under the pressure of that void. The architectural complex assimilates the surrounding environment, whether this be the landscape as at the Museu de Arte Contemporânea de Niterói, or blocks of old housing as at Havre. In other cases, it establishes a symbiosis with nature, as at Canoas House. Or there is sometimes even a dialectic confrontation, as at the Mondadori Headquarters, with the landscape and the historic context. Everything is happening in face of the void that is offered to be filled, even though this cannot be done, except metaphorically, under penalty of breaking the set’s scenic balance.
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Oscar Niemeyer’s prolific oeuvre includes several projects strewn across the globe, two of which are in New York and belong to the *causes célèbres* of Brazil’s modern architecture.¹ The first project, the Brazil Pavilion for the 1939 New York World’s Fair was designed in collaboration with Lucio Costa and the second one, the 1947 headquarters for the United Nations Organization (ONU), was designed in collaboration with the UN’s Board of Design Consultants led by Wallace Harrison. In both projects, the French-Swiss architect, Le Corbusier, is present both as a reference, or anti-reference, in the case of the Pavilion, or as a collaborator, in relation to the UN.

**I. THE BRAZIL PAVILION AT THE 1939 NEW YORK WORLD’S FAIR**

It was Lucio Costa who originally won the design competition for the Brazil Pavilion at the New York World’s Fair. Oscar Niemeyer, whose architectural career began in Costa’s office two years earlier, placed second. The Board preferred Costa’s entry on the basis that it better represented the “Brazilianess spirit” and commended Niemeyer’s for its economic and functional character.² The competition brief, in fact, warned against a “search for traditional or indigenous architectural details” and favored instead “an architectural form that would translate the Brazilian environment expression; and furthermore, that this architecture was preferably contemporary.”³ Even though it may not be so easy to determine what is meant by “the Brazilian environment expression”, one can assume that the Board did seek a project that could add a national dimension to an otherwise international architecture. The form by which Costa’s proposal represented the “Brazilianess spirit” is equally difficult to determine but his entry did feature a party that was both academic and modern: a monumental hall, with patios and atriums that had the proportion and scale of a palazzo. The scheme was symmetrical and not particularly responsive to the shape of the lot. The entire building, however, was lifted on pilotis creating a vast open ground floor that consisted of a two column deep peristyle, in between which activities could be freely distributed. Appended to the rectangular shaped building, was the trapezoidal auditorium also on pilotis and directly accessible via a ramp that meandered in and out of the building. In addition to the ramp, two sets of stairs led to the floor above where all the displays were arranged *en enfilade* around the central court. All external elevations were blind except for the front façade that was glazed and covered with sun-breakers on its lateral sides. The upper part of the internal elevations around the central court were also equipped with movable sun-breakers. In sum, the scheme was Corbusian in its vocabulary yet it maintained an academic heritage in its grammar.

Unlike Costa’s, Niemeyer’s entry did respond to the shape of the lot and incorporated the curve along one of its sides. A particularly “technical” aspect noted by the Board must have been the convex roof, which later became a recurring paradigm in Niemeyer’s architecture. The “functional character” of the project derives from a clear distribution of the program divided in two wings, one curved, holding all exhibition areas and the other straight, holding the remaining functions. The programmatic duality is repeated in the disposition of the pilotis, which follow the curve on one side and an orthogonal grid on the other. A forecourt leads to an open hall, which in turn connects to the two wings and a garden in the back with all internal elevations glazed.

In April 1938, a month after winning the competition, Costa sailed to New York taking Niemeyer with him, along with their respective spouses and daughters. While in New York, both architects set up shop in Wallace Harrison’s offices and worked on the version of the project that was subsequently submitted to the Fair’s Architecture Commission. In the version that was eventually built, Costa abandoned his own winning project and proposed instead a hybrid scheme that would be based on Niemeyer’s site plan yet maintain his winning entry’s open pilotis ground floor and the monumental ramp. Years later, Costa described the project in the following terms: “design and project by Oscar Niemeyer – from my previous parti, he only used - pilotis, ramp, and

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¹ Earlier versions of this text were published in *Oscar 102/Brasília 50: Eight Cases in Brazil’s Architectural Modernity* (Houston: RSA, 2010), organized by the author with a group of architecture students from Rice University.


³ Ibid.
The decision to adopt Niemeyer’s L-shaped plan, while lifting the building above ground, resulted in a parti able to stand out against the massiveness of the neighboring French pavilion. In addition to taking advantage of the French Pavilion’s blank elevation as backdrop to the east, this site strategy provided a perimeter street that delineated a garden bound by a riverside walk. As in Niemeyer’s competition entry, the elevation to the West was opaque, while elevations facing the garden were transparent. The southern elevation featured sun-breakers, as in Costa’s competition entry. The lot’s curvature became a paradigmatic form throughout the project and was used for the ramp, the portico, the mezzanine, as well as in the distribution of the structural system itself. As Costa wrote, “taking advantage of the lot’s elegant curve took the entire design over.”

American architect, Paul Lester Wiener was invited to design the Pavilion’s interiors and the various displays featuring a sampling of Brazilian commodities that targeted international markets. Mineral, agricultural, animal, and industrial products were organized in such a way as to impress the visitor with the economic potential of Brazil’s resources. Photographs of the historic city of Ouro Preto and the sculptures of Aleijadinho were also put on display along with models of modern harbors and buildings such as the yet to be completed, Ministry of Education and Health. Coffee related displays took center stage and a special bar was dedicated to serving coffee and Yerba mate, known then as “the delicious Brazilian tea.” Wiener’s strategy was one in which “design, per se, did not exist” or as he himself declared, “the architectonic style of the interiors and displays constitute one unit with the style of the building.” This strategy of homogenizing the various brands represented in the Pavilion coincided with the desires of the Brazilian Mission’s Commissioner General, Armando Vidal, to convey a sense of unity “without particularisms.” Wiener’s “homogeneous and integral composition of products” also coincided with Costa’s declared intentions to have the “decorative elements” become an “integral part of the composition.”

Products and raw materials were consequently displayed as part of larger arrangements that, on occasion, made direct references to works by other artists such as Vladimir Tatlin and Giorgio de Chirico.

The curved monumental ramp at the entrance led from the street level plaza to a portico and a terrace on the upper floor from which one could overlook a garden designed by Thomas Price. Visitor’s could then enter the double height space of the Good Neighbor Hall – so-called in reference to President Roosevelt’s 1933 Policy – on the wall of which large paintings by Candido Portinari were hung. These represented three scenes from rural Brazil, jangadeiro (fisherman), caipira (peasant), and gaúcho (cowboy). Brazil’s historical flags were lined up along the shorter end of the gallery, behind which an office was decorated in 18th Century style Portuguese woodwork, albeit protected by Corbusian sun-breakers on the front elevation. At the end of the deep perspective, and opposite to the Hall, a stair led to an undulating mezzanine floor that snaked its shape in between the columns. The ground floor beneath also presented displays of Brazilian products as well as bars and counters where visitors could sample various coffees. These were all arranged in an open free-plan formation in and around the pilotis with only one enclosed area, the restaurant and a dance floor at the far end.

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Paul Lester Wiener, cited in Pavilhão do Brasil, Feira Mundial de Nova York de 1939, p. 3.
Oscar in New York: The Pavilion and the United Nations

Oscar Niemeyer

Classics and Unseen

Oscar Niemeyer's project, second placed at the design competition for the Brazil Pavilion at the New York World's Fair, NY, Estados Unidos [1939]

Fundação Oscar Niemeyer
OSCAR NIEMEYER’S PROJECT, SECOND PLACED AT THE DESIGN COMPETITION FOR THE BRAZIL PAVILION AT THE NEW YORK WORLD’S FAIR, NY, Estados Unidos [1939]
OSCAR NIEMEYER'S PROJECT, SECOND PLACED AT THE DESIGN COMPETITION FOR THE BRAZIL PAVILION AT THE NEW YORK WORLD'S FAIR, NY, Estados Unidos [1939]

Fundação Oscar Niemeyer
For the monumental ramp leading to the terrace above and for the stair leading back down to the garden, Costa and Niemeyer applied for a building code variance since, according to New York code standards, the stair needed a landing half way through and the ramp was too steep. A third exemption had also been requested because the two stairs leading to the mezzanine floor were too close together. The Building Code Administration Board approved two of the three requests, neither the additional landing nor the extra set of stairs were imposed. Only the entrance ramp had to be extended in order to meet the maximum gradient allowed by the code. For Costa, the granting of variance requests legitimated the design of a project that had been considered “perfect” by John Hogan, the Director of Construction for the Building Code Administration Board.

The decision by the Board to extend the length of the ramp by 18 ft., however, only added to its gracefulness.

The Brazil Pavilion’s ability to interweave beauty, modernity, and the tropics resulted in an unqualified success among North American and European architectural critics who praised the building in a number of important journals such as the Magazine of Arts, Architectural Record, Architectural Forum, Architettura, Casabella, and L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui. Such international reception was subsequently used as an argument against less favorable reviews that were published back in Brazil where the battle for culture between neo-colonial academicists and modernists was still being waged. Ultimately, both Costa and Niemeyer were able to develop a distinct architectural language that departs from that of Le Corbusier while “respecting his lesson” by refusing to “subordinate the modern spirit to conveniences of a technical and functional order nor make a ‘pseudo-modern’ scenography, of the sort that is much in vogue in the U.S.”

For instance, the building, though affiliated to Le Corbusier’s five points, still maintained its perimeter bloc condition. The open ground floor had now been turned into a space dedicated to leisure and not just for passage. The generous use of curves was a direct critique of Le Corbusier’s emphasis on rectitude (i.e., straight lines and right angles). The binary opposition between the orthogonal structural grid and sinuous partitions was removed. Not only did walls curve but so did the distribution of pilotis. Finally, the ramp, which became a key feature in Niemeyer’s architecture, for extending the pleasure of penetrating a building by prolonging the visual display of its beauty in relation to its surroundings. An architecture that liberates one’s march from undue mechanization by no longer having to rely on mechanically regular steps imposed by risers and treads, thereby shifting circulation from the quantitative to the sensorial.

“...For Niemeyer ramps lengthen the pleasure to penetrate a building while prolonging the visual reception of its beauty in relation to its environment.”

In terms of an international reception and at the risk of committing a crime of lèse-majesté, one might also add a fourth version of the project, built decades later, the Carpenter Center, designed by Le Corbusier between 1961 and 1963. For Izabel Gass, a student who worked on this topic, the similarities are rather obvious: both buildings use a sinous ramp, are lifted on pilotis, have severely rounded forms as well as deep sunbreakers on their respective elevations. The main difference between them is in the latent geometry of their architecture: The symmetry of the first (Costa) and fourth (Corbusier) versions is axial and their curves are radial, deriving from circles, when the geometry of the third version (Niemeyer and Costa) is asymmetrical and its curves are splines. These two geometries represent opposing logics where for Le Corbusier what matters is modulation, with its repeatable units, when for Niemeyer, what matters is a fluid and indivisible continuity to which any tampering inevitably alters the whole. Included in this opposition is the Baroque proper, which is mistakenly used to describe Niemeyer’s architecture, which differs from that of Le Corbusier just as it does from that of Aleijadinho since the latter limits the continuity of his curved lines to tangentially connected arcs when, in fact, Niemeyer’s compositions require a constellation of reference points in space that exert various degrees of attraction and repulsion in

11 Lucio Costa, undated manuscript (Casa de Lucio Costa Archives).
12 Magazine of Arts (May 1939), Architectural Record (August 1939), Architectural Forum (June 1939), Architettura (October 1938), Casabella (September 1939), and Architecture d’Aujourd’hui (September 1947).
order to form complex topological surfaces. This dichotomy between the modular and the fluid also explains contemporary architecture’s desire to distance itself from the rationalism and cartesianism of its modern heritage while fostering closer ties with works such as Niemeyer’s, thereby leaving behind the square world of orthogonality and Newtonian science in order to find the excentric world of Einstein’s conception of space and time. Such an opposition between the modular and the fluid can best be illustrated in Niemeyer’s own Poema da Curva in which he refers to Einstein’s “curved world,” and which seems to directly counter Le Corbusier’s Poème de l’Angle Droit, even if by the time Niemeyer wrote his poem, Le Corbusier’s had already abandoned the rectitude of his angles. The opposition between the two poems is nonetheless as flagrant as Le Corbusier’s change of mind, which was noted by Niemeyer citing Ozenfant: “Le Corbusier, after having defended the purist discipline and loyalty to the right angle to which he claimed particular rights, seems to have decided to abandon it, having felt in the wind the premises of a new Baroque, coming from elsewhere.”

Le Corbusier was quick to deny having injected any baroquism in his architecture yet it remains true that for Le Corbusier, the curve “does permit a more subtle use of space” (his words), a meandering river, does get accused of being “ruinous, difficult and dangerous; it paralyzes.” For the French-Swiss architect, a river, like an idea, is ruled by the “law of the meander,” which inevitably throws them both off course and consequently bends their straightness (their metaphoric clarity): “The meander’s loops make something like a figure eight and that’s stupid.” The sketch that illustrates this “meander law” was drawn while flying over South America itself and was later incorporated in the Poème de l’Angle Droit where it is approximated with “the rampant the vermiculant the sinuant the reptant,” not to mention “varmin and snakes triggered by the potential of carion.”

In such a conception, the meander represents what is old and irrational as opposed to the rational straight line of modernity. Le Corbusier’s use of such metaphors probably sounded not all that convincing to Oscar Niemeyer who supposedly designed a meandering carpet for Minister of Education offices. It must have similarly sounded not all that convincing to Roberto Burle-Marx, for that matter, who drew for that same building exactly what Le Corbusier had criticized while flying over South America: a meandered garden seen from the sky. The sinuous curve became a most characteristic brand of Brazilian modern architecture and it officially appeared for the first time in Brazil’s pavilion that Costa and Niemeyer designed for the New York World’s fair. Access ramps in Niemeyer’s architecture consequently became the very ‘architecturalization’ of the meander, so criticized by Le Corbusier, when for Niemeyer ramps lengthen the pleasure to penetrate a building while prolonging the visual reception of its beauty in relation to its environment.

II. THE UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS IN NEW YORK

It must have been in April 1947 that Oscar Niemeyer wrote an ecstatic letter to his mentor, Lucio Costa, in which he related his ongoing experience in New York as a member for the Board of Design invited to collaborate on the United Nations Headquarters project.\textsuperscript{19} Niemeyer informed Costa that ever since his arrival a month prior, he had been abstaining, on Le Corbusier’s request, from presenting any drawings. This was due to the Franco-Swiss architect’s fear that his own scheme – which he had begun developing before the formation of the Board of Design – was being misunderstood and that yet another scheme from the same ideological camp would only add to the confusion.\textsuperscript{20} Meanwhile, Wallace K. Harrison, who led the Board of Design and who invited each member to propose a scheme, was insisting that Niemeyer had “to move on his own” and that “he had been invited to participate as a full member of the team.”\textsuperscript{21} As Niemeyer recounts in the letter, he kept on refusing on the basis that he “did not want to do anything that might vex or undermine Le Corbusier.”\textsuperscript{22}

The secretary for the Board of Design, George Dudley, suggests that Niemeyer “felt freer to voice his opinion” while Le Corbusier was away.\textsuperscript{23} Despite his continued refusal to propose a scheme of his own, Niemeyer first physical contribution occurred in scheme number 17, based on which a single common plane was to be shared by all buildings. This meant abandoning the extensive roof terrace above the General Assembly building, which was a major element proposed in Le Corbusier’s scheme. Niemeyer had yet to present a scheme of his own even though Sven Markelius and Ernest Weissman who arrived after him, already had. This left Niemeyer, as reported to Costa, “in a difficult situation in which he only talked without producing anything.”\textsuperscript{24} “The confusion was such, continued Niemeyer, that Le Corbusier himself advised me to make a suggestion.”\textsuperscript{25} Having been given the ‘go ahead’ by Le Corbusier, it took less than a week for Niemeyer to draft his own scheme, numbered 32. Upon seeing the project, says the letter, Le Corbusier “was even a bit surprised” and asked Niemeyer to “declare that a final solution is needed and that the only projects that are really about architecture are ours.”\textsuperscript{26} Le Corbusier had obviously grown impatient with the multitude of schemes being proposed and had begun pressuring the Board to, as he put it, “concentrate on a few, not thirty plans.”\textsuperscript{27} The letter to Costa ends with a request to forgive the lack of modesty (which was due to his having been “satisfied with the work”) and two little sketches showing his scheme next to Le Corbusier’s.\textsuperscript{28}

On April 25\textsuperscript{th}, Niemeyer presented scheme number 32, which consisted of perspectives drafted by Hugh Ferriss, a model, and eight plates of drawings. A brief on the eighth plate not only explained the project but, surprisingly enough, also called the attention of his colleagues “to the advantages offered by scheme number 23 in functional as well as plastic interest.”\textsuperscript{29} Number 23 was the scheme proposed by Le Corbusier, for whom the combination of function and beauty was precisely that which he had unsuccess-fully been promoting. The combination was ironically valorized in Niemeyer’s scheme or as Dudley, later noted, “the comparison between Le Corbusier’s heavy block and Niemeyer’s startling, elegantly articulated composition seemed to me to be in every-

\textsuperscript{19} In order to avoid the lengthy competition process that produced the League of Nations on Lake Geneva, the then Secretary-General, Trygve Lie, appointed a Board of Design, which consisted of Gyle Soilleux (Australia); Gustave Brunfaut (Belgium); Oscar Niemeyer (Brazil); Ernest Cormier (Canada); Suu-ch’eng Liang (China); Le Corbusier (France); Sven Markelius (Sweden); Howard Robertson (United Kingdom); Julio Vilamajó (Uruguay); and Nikolai Bassov (USSR). Wallace Harrison acted as Director of Planning and was ultimately in charge of the project.


\textsuperscript{22} Oscar Niemeyer, Letter to Lucio Costa, undated (Casa de Lucio Costa Archives).

\textsuperscript{23} Dudley, A Workshop for Peace, p. 152.

\textsuperscript{24} Niemeyer, Letter to Lucia Costa, undated.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{27} Dudley, A Workshop for Peace, p. 240.

\textsuperscript{28} Niemeyer, Letter to Lucia Costa, undated.

\textsuperscript{29} Oscar Niemeyer, Brief for the UN Headquarters, Scheme 32, plate #8 (Oscar Niemeyer Foundation Archives).
one’s mind.”

Le Corbusier could not have been pleased by the positive reception given to Niemeyer. He is even remembered as having referred to the architect from Brazil as “just a young man” whose scheme “is not from a mature architect.”

More telling is the sketch Le Corbusier drew at the time, in his *carnet de poche*, comparing the two schemes, one showing the body of a reclining women, marked 23, and labeled “architectural hierarchy = beautiful” and the other, showing pieces of a dismembered female body, marked 32, and labeled “architectural space = mediocre.”

Le Corbusier, whose objective all along had been to convince the committee to develop the project he had suggested much earlier in the site selection phase was suddenly faced with a project that had the recognized qualities he promoted but that was not his. In an effort to rescue his scheme, Le Corbusier filibustered the following meeting and, among other statements, argued that Niemeyer had “without knowing it” produced a variation of scheme 23, which had the virtue of allowing changes while keeping “basic conceptions.”

Despite all having favored Niemeyer’s ‘open’ version, the strategy worked since they were all equally convinced, and Niemeyer among them, that the project had to adopt a Corbusian ideology. On May 1st, Harrison found it necessary to decide on how to proceed while insisting on consensus. He also advised the Board “that the only satisfying scheme is the one carried out and drawn up by Niemeyer, similar to Le Corbusier’s idea.” In an attempt to reach a compromise, Harrison had approximated Niemeyer’s scheme to sketches drawn by Le Corbusier months earlier, which showed a free-standing Secretariat Building. Without objections, a decision was taken: to give Niemeyer’s scheme 32 the green light to become the basis for the final project.

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31 Ibid., p. 240.
35 Ibid., p. 252.
In a letter to Dudley, written decades later, Niemeyer explains the hybrid scheme as having resulted from a request made by Le Corbusier, to which, “feeling constrained,” he was unable to refuse.

A few days later, a new scheme modified scheme 32 by moving the General Assembly building back to the center of the site, as originally placed in Le Corbusier’s scheme 23. This came to be called scheme 23/32 from which all subsequent solutions were derived including the version that was eventually built. In a letter to Dudley, written decades later, Niemeyer explains the hybrid scheme as having resulted from a request made by Le Corbusier, to which, “feeling constrained,” he was unable to refuse. Niemeyer explains his decision as having occurred the day after the meeting when all Board members unanimously approved his scheme 32. Le Corbusier came to see him and convinced him to move the General Assembly building to the center of the site: “hierarchically, it is the complex’s principal element. Its place, therefore, is in the center of the site.” Despite disagreeing with the move, which divided the plaza in two and thereby diminished its monumental character, Niemeyer agreed, even if it meant, as he put it, disappointing Harrison with a “somewhat contradictory attitude accepting first the choice of my project only to then refuse to develop it in order to agree with Le Corbusier.”

The great irony of this process is that the parti of the tall blade next to squat auditorium, the tall Secretariat building next to the short General Assembly Hall, must have been familiar to both Le Corbusier and to Niemeyer since both had already worked together similar (and similarly divergent) partis in Rio de Janeiro 11 years earlier, in the university campus designed by Le Corbusier and drawn by Niemeyer, in the separated version of the campus project designed by Costa yet also drawn by Niemeyer, or in the smaller version for the Ministry of Education and Health, on which all three architects worked in one form or another. The are other precedents such as the Lenin Institute designed by Ivan Leonidov in 1927 and the parti is repeated by Le Corbusier in his project for Sain Diè in 1945, by Costa in his Three Powers Plaza project for Brasilia’s Pilot Plan, and finally adopted by Niemeyer in a duplicated version, two secretariats and two assembly halls. Since then, the distance between high and low buildings will greatly vary in Niemeyer’s own work.

36 Oscar Niemeyer, Letter to George Dudley, December, 26th, 1991 (Oscar Niemeyer Foundation Archives).
TESTIMONIALS

ALVARO PUNTONI
ANGELO BUCCI
CIRO PIRONDI
MARCIO KOGAN
PAULO MENDES DA ROCHA
RUY OHTAKE
A graduate of the College of Architecture and Urbanism of the Universidade de São Paulo (FAU/USP), holds a Master’s and a PhD from the same institution. in which he is a founding partner and coordinator for the Pedagogical Board. He is an invited professor for FAU/Mackenzie and for the Taller Sudamerica da Faculdade de Arquitetura, Diseño y Urbanismo of the Universidad de Buenos Aires. Since 2004, he takes part in Grupo SP.
It is impossible to escape from Oscar Niemeyer in São Paulo. Everyone who lives in this state capital has, at some moment, visited Ibirapuera Park and came across its open marquee. In the lack of an official name, this space is simply called the “Ibirapuera Marquee,” and it has no a priori function except to protect us from the rain and the sun, and to serve as a link between the buildings. I can still recall how strange the Oca seemed to me as a child, the attraction it held over me. Likewise, when in downtown, the city’s residents and visitors alike will look at the Copan Building as inevitably as they will observe the moon on a clear night.

His buildings somehow light the citizens’ paths. Niemeyer has this symbolic importance. With his elegant designs, this architect has pushed architecture to its limit with the aid of civil engineers, but mainly guided by his own structural knowledge. His buildings give rise to unusual spatialities. At the Memorial da América Latina, which dates from the late 1980s, it is possible to perceive the essence of this architecture: its free spans give rise to incredible spaces.

Whenever I travel anywhere that is home to a work by Niemeyer, I always look for it. I particularly like the headquarters of the French Communist Party, in Paris, a city that also features works by another great architect, Le Corbusier, who influenced Niemeyer, for example, in the use of pilotis (a set of columns that support a construction, creating large free spans at ground level). At the headquarters of the French Communist Party, Oscar managed to make the building seem to hover over the ground of Paris.

Oscar Niemeyer’s many works are scattered among the different cities of the world. Each has its own history, its own peculiarity, and it is really awesome to imagine that they are all interrelated, they create a dialogue with the city, with the people who live in it. This relationship is often a silent one, which cannot be announced. One must feel it. For me, the spatiality of life that Niemeyer’s architecture offers is the most important aspect of his work.
MEMORIAL DA AMERICA LATINA, São Paulo, SP, Brazil [1987]

photo: Michel Moch | Fundação Oscar Niemeyer
A graduate of the College of Architecture and Urbanism of the Universidade de São Paulo (FAU/USP), where he also completed his Master’s and PhD, and currently teaches. He has served as an invited professor at various universities in Latin America, the United States and Europe. He is a fellow of the American Institute of Architects, and has received important awards, including that of the International Young Generation, 12th Architecture International Biennial of Buenos Aires and the IAB Award for Best Constructed Object.
My first contact with Oscar Niemeyer’s architecture was indirect. I saw representations of it. One of them was the Alvorada Gas Station, on Anhanguera Highway between Ribeirão Preto and Orlândia, my home town. When I was seven or eight, when I entered public school, I learned about Brasilia. I understood that the gas station on the highway paid homage to the national presidential residence (Alvorada Palace). Every Brazilian child can recognize some of Niemeyer’s buildings. It is enough to sketch some outlines on the chalkboard and the children recognize Alvorada Palace, Brasilia Cathedral, or the National Congress. Moreover, they are able to draw these buildings. These works are imprinted on our imagination.

Mobilizing memories and recognizing in these images the source for other projects is the greatest value of Niemeyer’s legacy. Not only in architecture, but also in culture. Not only in Brazil, but in the world. It is not by chance that, when an architect like Rem Koolhaas visited the country, he made sure to go to Rio de Janeiro to talk with Oscar Niemeyer. The freedom in his work is an admirable characteristic. Errors – in the sense of what escapes from the established codes that another architect would rarely dare to do – are what lend his works an incredible result. I am referring to the freedom of a person who designs buildings with the courage of taking risks on the border of what has not yet been done. The parameter that is established in consequence of this freedom is widened.

Oscar Niemeyer is a decisive architect for São Paulo. The Copan Building is emblematic. That curved blade, 35 stories high and more than 100 meters in length has so much freedom it seems that the developers must have had the entire city block at their disposal. But that was not the case. It was inserted on an irregular polygon, the ground floor is sloped and the stories are perfectly level. For this it is surprising. At the same time, the architect decided to abandon the project when it was modified without his consent. The project at Ibirapuera Park, with Burle Marx, was made to celebrate the city’s 4th Centennial, in 1954. It recovered the polluted stream called Córrego do Sapateiro and made it part of the city’s most important park. Wouldn’t it have been possible, since that time, to begin a similar process with other rivers in the city? It is clear that these works have imparted to various generations a dose of stimulus and confidence in Brazilian cultural production.
ALVORADA PALACE, Brasília, DF, Brazil [1957]

photo: Michel Moch | Fundação Oscar Niemeyer
Is an architect and director for Escola da Cidade. He serves on the Board of Instituto Brasileiro de Arte e Cultura (Ibac), of Casa de Lucio Costa, of Instituto dos Arquitetos do Brasil and of Fundação Oscar Niemeyer. Author of a series of outstanding architectural works in Brazil, he has received various awards.
Brazilian poet Ferreira Gullar conveys Niemeyer’s genius with the following lines: “Com seu traço futuro/ Oscar nos ensina/ Que o sonho é popular” [With his future look/ Oscar teaches us/ That the dream belongs to common people]. Creating things that pertain to common people while also being a great artist is a difficult combination, only achieved by the greatest masters.

Some people possess the talent of freedom, which is generally associated with another talent, that of generosity. Personalities like Nelson Mandela, José Saramago and Oscar Niemeyer made their activity in the world an inspiring drawing that compels us to believe in the possibility of a more dignified society. They teach us that, even in gloomy times, it is possible to carry on.

For Niemeyer, architecture is invention. This is why he and a group of intellectuals designed an educational project with emphasis on the humanist dimension for the training of architectural students. Art, literature and history would be the basis for learning in institutions in Brasília and Algiers. In the last ten years, Niemeyer also conceived a school in Niterói, in which he blended the social vision of the architect in relation to the country with the possibility of creating beauty for everyone, which is the inverse of training in respect to trends and specializations centered on the market, as takes place in most architectural schools nowadays.

Personally experiencing Oscar’s architecture is inspiring. I had the chance to live for ten years in an apartment in the Eiffel Building, at Praça da República. Later, I lived for three years in the Copan Building. These experiences allowed me to understand details of his architecture. For example, a wall might seem sloped for no reason at first sight. But when one goes out on the street it is possible to see that that angle is precisely the slope of the street outside, which is different from that of the building. The wall is perfectly implanted. Canoas House is another example. Its integration with the trees and with the mountain makes it look like that construction has always been there.
Oscar Niemeyer’s work is able to assume this human and simultaneously oneiric dimension, especially in São Paulo. It shelters our dreams and joins them to the reality of the everyday life of an extremely dense city. His work reminds us that it is possible to live with more tranquility, more poetry, more dreams, more imagination. As I see it, the emanation of this dimension of human life in his life and work is owing to how densely and intrinsically it was part of his being.

Thinking about Oscar makes us wonder what country we would have if its fabric and schools were designed on the basis of not only his architecture, but especially his thoughts and actions. Certainly, we would at least have a more beautiful and just Brazil.
An architect from São Paulo, he represented Brazil in the most recent edition of the Venice Biennale and has received more than 200 national and international awards. He is an honorary member of the American Institute of Architects, and was ranked by the magazine Wallpaper as one of the 100 most influential people in his area.
When I was a student of architecture, I did not like Niemeyer at all. He was nearly an institutional element that practically obliged us, at the college, to follow his thought, which profoundly influenced an entire generation in Brazil. At that time, I was thinking about another architecture. The Centre Georges Pompidou arose and I wanted to conceive another one. I felt bothered because all of the public works were executed by Niemeyer, nearly obliterating a new generation of architects. This was obviously an attitude of youthful rebelliousness. When I started to become an architect, I began to hold his work in incredibly high regard, kneeling before it.

Gradually, I was seduced. I learned to like and to respect his work. Niemeyer is indisputably one of the masters of modern architecture. The clean lines, the beauty of the solutions, the technique, the power of what is a structure of engineering is very striking. There is also that sensuality that was put into modernism, as in the Ministry of Education and Health Building, in Rio de Janeiro. With the arrival of Le Corbusier, this completely iconic story of modernism arose. Suddenly, in this backwater, totally isolated country, during World War II, a spectacular architecture was born, as Lucio Costa has stated. In my opinion, it is the best modernism ever seen in the world, made not only by Oscar Niemeyer, but also by a great generation of architects.

In São Paulo, we noticed that the postcard images of our state capital were being designed by an architect from Rio de Janeiro – as was the case with the Copan Building and Ibirapuera Park. I consider the Oca the most beautiful museum in the world. It impacts people’s day-to-day lives. It is part of the life of all the inhabitants of São Paulo. Anyone who visits the park on a weekend will spend some time beneath the marquee; they can walk, catch an exhibition at the Biennial Pavilion. It is wonderful.

I very much like the collaboration with engineering that he promotes. But it seems that today, in the market, this has been forgotten. Sometimes we try to be a little more sophisticated in a structural solution, but no one wants to go out on a limb, “to avoid losing money.” A structural engineer once told me: “We do a project and no one even remembers that we did it.” But that is not true. Niemeyer’s story springs from structural engineering.
OCA BUILDING, São Paulo, SP, Brazil [1951]

photo: André Seiti [2014]
A 1954 graduate of the College of Architecture and Urbanism of Universidade Mackenzie, in São Paulo. He received the title of emeritus professor in 2010. His works include the Gymnasium of Clube Atlético Paulistano the Official Pavilion of Brazil at Expo 70, in Japan, the Museu Brasileiro da Escultura (Mube), in São Paulo, and the remodeling of Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo, for which he was awarded the Mies van der Rohe Prize for Latin American Architecture, in 2000. In 2006, he received the Pritzker Architectural Prize for his overall oeuvre.
Oscar Niemeyer’s architecture is a key element in the Brazilians’ mindset, the curriculum of schools, the study of architecture and the development of my generation, without a doubt. His work evinces a concern, an uneasiness, a summons that comes from nature with its various phenomena. His oeuvre has great lyrical power. An example is Canoas House, in Rio de Janeiro, both for the scenography given by the horizontality of the roof independent from its curves and by the rock outcropping, which becomes monumental next to the pool. It is an interesting work, which cannot be copied from a formal point of view. On the other hand, is also impossible to abandon its appeal.

It is likewise necessary to underscore the importance of Oscar Niemeyer’s work in the city of São Paulo, surprising in both quantity and relevance. The Copan Building is extraordinary. Its curves are a formal necessity for providing stability to a thin building while also allowing for the entrance of light and ventilation from both sides. For me, it is a prototype that could be adopted, imagining architecture as a form of knowledge: the fundamental idea of the city that flows in the movement of its pedestrians and dwellings, without distinction building by building, without large and small apartments, rich and poor. Ibirapuera Park is wonderful. Its marquee inaugurates a large promenade, articulates the buildings, organizes the gardens and everything that is seen around it. They are extraordinarily intelligent designs, demonstrative of architecture as a specific form of knowledge, linked to the human habitat.

Niemeyer’s oeuvre is eminently imposing, highly visible and extraordinary in terms of its technique, often for its grace, for the appeal of the not immediately identifiable shapes. The Oca, for example, is a small museum built in an incredible way in regard to the transformation and application of techniques in relation to the soil, to the stability of the construction. Its shell, its dome, possesses an entirely self-sufficient structure. On the inside there is a sort of cylinder, which is a retaining wall beneath ground level. There is also a structure of floor slabs and pillars that arises from the inside, all autonomous, without touching one another. This means that the solutions were made strictly according to the needs of each situation. The circular form is a very intelligent choice, because the circle is indeformable provided it is submitted to homogeneous forces. In the same way, the structure of the dome and the independence of the intermediary floors is very beautiful, mainly because they are not submitted to the circular form, they are free shapes.

Niemeyer is an exceptional builder. It is enough to see the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Caracas, a design made for implantation in Venezuela, to understand that he was able to concentrate the load at a single point and to invert the pyramid, knowing very well that the sloping walls tend to pull, inducing the slabs into self-tension, a strong traction. It is all excellently prepared for a successful construction. Oscar was able to bring technique into play so that it could spotlight his success.
the surprising use of technique in niemeyer's architecture | PAULO MENDES DA ROCHA

OSCAR NIEMEYER | classics and unseen

AUDITÓRIO IBIRAPUERA | OSCAR NIEMEYER, São Paulo, SP, Brazil [1989]
photo: André Seiti [2014]

BIENNIAL BUILDING (CONJUNTO IBIRAPUERA), São Paulo, SP, Brazil [1951]
photo: André Seiti [2014]
IBIRAPUERA'S MARQUEE, São Paulo, SP, Brazil [1954]

photo: André Seiti [2014]
A graduate of the College of Architecture and Urbanism of the Universidade de São Paulo (FAU/USP). He has designed more than 300 works in Brazil and abroad. In 2007, he won the Colar de Ouro, the top award from the Instituto de Arquitetos do Brasil (IAB). He received the title of emeritus professor from the Faculdade de Arquitetura de Santos, and that of professor *honoris causa* from the Universidade Braz Cubas. He participated in the 20th Congress of the International Union of Architecture, in Beijing. He was praised by Oscar Niemeyer for his formal/aesthetic freedom.
I consider Oscar Niemeyer the most significant architect in the world until the day he died. His work spanned a large part of the 20th Century and the beginning of the 21st. A very important aspect, which sparked reflections around the world, is that he managed to elaborate beautiful syntheses, joining architecture and urbanism. His architectural designs always took the space of the city into consideration. This extremely strong link is probably the only one in the world, and is present since his very first drawings. When Oscar Niemeyer made, for example, the Ministry of Education and Health in the 1940s, he adjusted the design proposed by Le Corbusier: he raised the height of the pilotis from 4 to 10 meters. In so doing, he not only linked the streets on either side, but inserted a government building in an urban space, which was much more than simply considering the surroundings.

In the early 1950s, Oscar designed the Copan Building. I consider the Copan more than a building, as I think that it can be considered a construction that articulates an extremely important plan for the recovery of the city of São Paulo. The investors wanted to build three or four buildings in the same space. Oscar redid the design with that shape that dialogues with the city, which challenges the city. Soon after he designed the Copan he made the plans for São Paulo’s Ibirapuera Park, a grand lesson of architecture and urbanism. Urbanism in the strong sense, of proposing something within the park but which flowed throughout and even beyond it. His momentous proposal was the way in which he linked the buildings. It is not a simple marquee. It is a space whose proportions foster a rich conviviality. On the weekends, it is the scene of thousands of skateboarders and in-line skaters, people playing checkers, reading, or doing countless other activities. All linked with artistic exuberance. Oscar was a master.
Of his international works, I like very much the one in Le Havre, France, and that in Negev, Israel. I would also underscore the French Communist Party Headquarters. In that architectural complex, the view flows through everything. Oscar was always perfect in the proportions. With surprising relations between volume and space. This is the case of the Oca, in Ibirapuera, and the Museu Nacional de Brasília. In the 1980s, Oscar did important projects such as the Sambódromo, in Rio de Janeiro, and the Museu de Arte Contemporânea (MAC) in Niterói (RJ).

Niemeyer, who after the age of 30 was not guided by any specific school, was a great pioneer. He was guided by intuition, which led him to the avant-garde. His work was very controversial at first. But every avant-garde is like that, because it breaks away from a series of consolidated notions, creating controversy. His thoughts were highly instrumental in my own training. Especially in terms of creative capacity and faith in what one is doing. I am convinced that it is by practicing the profession that we can acquire this exercise in proportion, going back and forth between working, designing, and making sketches over previous drawings.
MUSEU DE ARTE CONTEMPORÂNEA, Niterói, RJ, Brazil [1996]

photo: Michel Moch | Fundação Oscar Niemeyer
OSCAR NIEMEYER:
CLASSICS AND UNSEEN

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