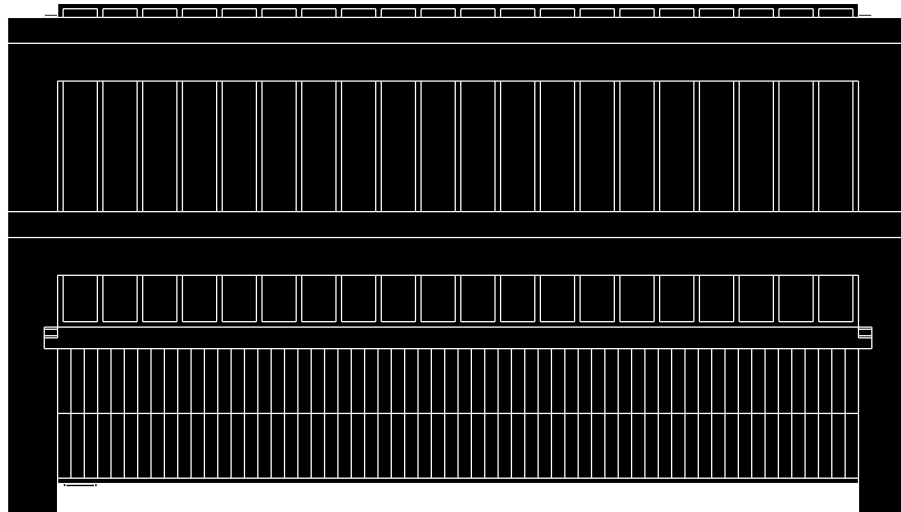


# TOO BEAUTIFUL TO BE TRUE: LINA BO BARDI'S MASP, OR AN "ARCHITECTURED" LIE<sup>1</sup>

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Photographs by Leonardo Finotti



When asked to discuss her design for the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), Lina Bo Bardi often spoke in terms of monumentality: “I looked for a simple architecture, one that could directly communicate what in the past was called ‘monumental’, in the sense of the ‘collective’, of ‘civic dignity,’” she once said. And in a 1967 text titled “O novo Trianon”, written while the building was still under construction, she reiterated her point: “What I call monumental has nothing to do with size or ‘pomp’ but relates to a sense of collectivity, that is, a collective consciousness. Anything that goes beyond the ‘particular’, reaching out to the collective, can (and perhaps should) be monumental.”

The message is clear. For Bo Bardi, monumentality does not depend on a building’s dimensions, but on its use. Nothing is monumental as such, but anything can be. And nothing is monumental forever. Regardless of the architect’s intention, it is the users who will ultimately decide – and keep on deciding, with their future choices – what is monumental, and what is not. Not by chance, Bo Bardi also wrote: “I would like to see people going there to attend open-air exhibitions, take part in debates, listen to music and watch films. I would like to see children play there in the morning and afternoon sun. And to be fair-minded about it, there should even be space for gigs and everyday bad taste.”

The same identification between monument and collective function can be found in the pages of one of the most influential architectural texts of those years, *L’architettura della città* (1966), where Aldo Rossi tells us that the “primary elements” that make up the city “refer to the public, collective character of urban elements ... made by the collective for the collective”. If Rossi’s and Bo Bardi’s views coincide here, it probably owes more to the mood of the times than to an in-depth knowledge of each other’s writings. However, we should note one big difference between the two: Rossi elaborated a theory on the monument, whereas Bo Bardi built one.

Except, in Bo Bardi’s case, what actually functions as a monument, as a civic and collective hub, is an empty space: the plaza created by the MASP. And this plaza is quite extraordinary, both for its arrangement – rather than being placed alongside the building, it spans between its lower and upper parts – and the reason for this arrangement. So, why did Bo Bardi design such a strange plaza? And was she entirely convinced that it would develop the “monumental” function

<sup>1</sup> This text is extracted from a broader research project undertaken as a visiting professor at the Faculdade de Arquitetura da Universidade de São Paulo (FAU-USP) in 2014–15. The research mainly relies on documents consulted in Paulista institutions and archives, such as: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo; Sistema Municipal de Processos/ Prefeitura do Município de São Paulo (SIMPROC); Arquivo Histórico de São Paulo; Arquivo Histórico Documental/Biblioteca de História da Arte/MASP; Instituto Lina Bo e P.M. Bardi. For further information, including literary and documentary sources, I invite the reader to consult my book on this subject, forthcoming from Editora 34 (São Paulo), or my essay “MASP. Breve história de um mito”, *Projeto Design*, no. 439 (2017), 2–9.

Lina Bo Bardi declared this for the first time in 1960: “This kind of structure was not the result of any architectural eccentricity. The architect didn’t look for an original conception, but tried instead to respond to an imperative.”

she desired? To understand why she devised such an unusual solution, we need to know something of the background to the project.

MASP occupied the former site of the Trianon, a dance hall built in the 1910s. The hall was largely underground (though it was open towards the city centre), and its roof was at the same level as Avenida Paulista. There were wonderful views over the urban landscape both from the Trianon and from the square above it, one of the highest points in the city, known universally as the “Belvedere”. In 1951 the bulk of the Trianon was knocked down to make way for the First São Paulo Biennial pavilion, which was supposed to be a temporary building, though it was not removed after the biennial, but remained in place, slowly falling apart. And this is where Bo Bardi begins her story, as she tells us how the site called out to her:

1957 was the year they demolished [what remained of] the “old” Trianon [with] its sun-filled Belvedere (practically the only one in the whole city), which lives on to this day in the memories of past generations of children. And one afternoon, as I was passing this lot on Avenida Paulista, I realized that this was the *only* place to build the MASP, the only site, in view of its special place in the popular imagination, worthy of housing the first museum of art in Latin America.

Although only founded in 1947, the MASP was already by the late 1950s an extremely important institution. It had an extraordinary collection studded with gems – by Mantegna, Raphael, El Greco, Bosch, Rembrandt, Manet, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Modigliani, Picasso, among others – all assembled by the director of the museum, Pietro Maria Bardi (Lina’s husband). In its early years, the museum was housed on one floor (later two) of a city-centre high-rise belonging to the “owner” and “creator” of the MASP, Francisco de Assis Chateaubriand, head of the Diários Associados media empire.

“A great collection needs an iconic building to match” – that’s how we might expect Bo Bardi to explain the museum’s structure, where the volume containing the main exhibition spaces is lifted into the sky, suspended from two enormously long pre-stressed concrete beams, resting on equally massive piers. But in her words we find nothing of the sort. Instead, she chooses to describe her design as if it were the mere consequence of a legal obligation, and not a conscious choice.<sup>2</sup> In a public lecture in 1990, Bo Bardi reflects on the arrangement:



The MASP, seen from across Avenida Paulista. Photograph by Leonardo Finotti

Postcard of the Trianon with its Belvedere, n.d.



I never set out to make the largest free span in the world. It so happens that the plot was donated on the condition that a Belvedere would be there, with a view of downtown São Paulo. If I'd done away with the Belvedere, and built a building with columns, the plot would have gone straight back to the donor's heirs ... Given that the famous Belvedere had to be kept untouched, there could be no columns. How do you span 80m without columns? The only way is with a large structure.

Presented this way, the MASP span is less a creative achievement, and more the unavoidable consequence of an obligation. P.M. Bardi gives further details, telling us that the site had been donated to the city by the engineer Joaquim Eugênio de Lima (designer of Avenida Paulista) on the condition that views over the city would not be obstructed by any future building.

“And one afternoon, as I was passing this lot on Avenida Paulista...” Doesn't it sound just like the beginning of a fairy tale? And indeed, it is one of the most beautiful stories in the history of modern architecture, affirmed by the accounts of Lina's husband, the museum director; the structural engineer, Carlos de Figueiredo Ferraz; and innumerable scholars over the past 50 years. We want to believe it as well, reluctant to admit that it might just be *too beautiful to be true*. Yet we have to face up to reality.

#### A mid-1950s fairy tale

We can begin to peel back the layers of MASP's untruths by comparing a well-known text Bo Bardi wrote in 1967 for *Mirante das Artes*,

which reports the story as we know it, with an unpublished draft for the same article, hidden away in the archive. Here, writing only for herself, Bo Bardi does not rehearse the famous narrative of the MASP – there's no mention of the owner, or of the legal conditions attached to the site.

A closer scrutiny of the two texts is revealing. In the published version, for example, we read: “A work of architecture can be evaluated in linguistic terms, from a semantic, syntactic and pragmatic point of view ... But all of these components are components of a logic of propositions.” On their own, these words don't make much sense, but when we look at the corresponding section in the unpublished draft, things become clearer:

In designing the new Trianon Complex, my first concern was of a semantic kind. A building able to communicate its essence with immediacy, and not give rise to any false interpretation or misunderstanding ... I discarded any “free” solution, even if more “interesting” at first sight, in order to design a simple, compact and honest form.



One of the many designs for the Trianon lot developed by the technical office of the city government. From *Diário da Noite*, 25 May 1957

What we have here is a more honest statement of aims, one that conflicts with the “authorized” account, in that it presents the design solution as the consequence of a choice, rather than the ineluctable response to a pre-existing condition. “I discarded any ‘free’ solution”, Bo Bardi states, unambiguously, and she goes on: “The prestressed concrete structure of the four 70m-long beams was [term missing] the most correct one, in so far as it allowed a [formal] ‘tidiness’ that any solution with ‘load-bearing walls’ or hidden intermediate columns would not have allowed.” In other words, Bo Bardi *could* have built columns or walls to support the upper volume, but she “discarded” this solution for formal (and semantic) reasons. The truth about the MASP is finally coming out.

And the deeper you dig, the more mysteries you uncover. It turns out the original owner of the site was not who P.M. Bardi said it was, and it was not donated to the city, but sold. Even the year Bo Bardi says she first encountered the lot – 1957 – does not tally with documentary sources. But those details are not the point here. What we should be asking is *what* MASP really is, because it’s not what we’ve been led to believe.

Taking the unpublished typescript at face value, Bo Bardi’s first concern was of a “semantic kind”. And to achieve a building that “could communicate its essence with immediacy” she stripped away all superfluous elements that might have compromised the “simple, compact and honest form”. Any load-bearing elements that could not be eliminated were pushed as far as possible to the extremities of the site, which also allowed for the creation of an open collective space, unconstrained by vertical elements.

But why was Bo Bardi so concerned with the signifying value of the building? For one thing, she was personally invested in the work. She was designing a home for her husband’s creation, the greatest art collection in Latin America. To communicate the ambitions of the museum, the design had to possess immediate, enormous visual power. But the big problem MASP faced was how to get the actual owner of the plot – the city – to fund a project of such monumental ambition. Fortunately for the museum, São Paulo’s mayor, Adhemar de Barros (whose reputation for corruption and shady dealings still lives on), had monumental ambitions of his own. Barros struck a deal with the MASP’s owner: if Assis Chateaubriand’s media empire would support his political comeback, then he would get the museum built.<sup>3</sup> The deal was never reported in the press (not even in

rival newspapers owned by the many enemies of Chateaubriand and hence of the MASP), though it was disclosed by both Lina Bo and P.M. Bardi.<sup>4</sup> Curiously, neither of them seems to have thought there was anything criminal about this arrangement, whereby vast sums of public money were spent to secure media backing for one man’s electoral campaign. It was just a “gentlemen’s agreement”.

Nor was there any coverage in the press of the gratuitously large budget for the project. As we have seen, there was in fact no legal obstacle to placing any columns or load-bearing walls under the suspended block, a solution that would have significantly reduced costs, though it would have impaired the “tidiness” of the span. In this context her claim, “I never set out to make the largest free span in the world”, is disingenuous: she knew full well that the construction of the largest free span in the world would guarantee the MASP instant worldwide exposure. And this is why, “one fine afternoon”, the alleged donor and the elusive use conditions entered the MASP tale. The “obligation” to maintain the Belvedere allowed Bo Bardi’s bold arrangement to go unchallenged. The chosen solution, according to the published version of events, was the mere “effect” of a “cause” that was indisputable.

#### The price you pay

If the MASP is the product of this kind of subterfuge, then to what extent can it be accepted as a monument? And if its well-known history is merely a fiction, why believe Bo Bardi genuinely desired to create an architectural work capable of stimulating and hosting “a sense of collectivity” and “civic dignity”? Is there not a profound disconnect between the ambition and the execution of the project? The answer is: not necessarily. Bo Bardi may have been complicit in the process, but this does not mean she was a chronic liar. Her passion and political engagement were undoubtedly sincere, and her writings offer a clear-eyed – and still relevant – perspective on the Brazilian economy, politics, society and culture. While a backroom deal took place, it was clear the MASP was not conceived for the benefit of politicians or the city’s elite; it was meant for the people of São Paulo. Overseeing every aspect of the project, Bo Bardi created that rarest of things – an authentic, modern and *built* monument.

That Lina Bo Bardi was successful in her realisation of a monument does not need to be proved: up to today, the MASP has worked as a landmark – the place you go when you don’t know where to go,

because if some kind of gathering is going to happen, then you can be sure it will happen there. Though the architect could not pre-programme the future function of the plaza, the span is a clear expression of her desire to create a kind of “living monument” to be shaped by its users.

At the same time, Bo Bardi was aware of the conflict inherent in of her design, as we see from an unpublished draft of a letter (not dated, but around 1967) written to a friend:

The Museum was conceived with the aim of communicating and creating spaces for man – from a stylistic point of view, the architecture of the museum at the Avenida Paulista level is an “absence”, unless the space is occupied by meetings and people, who “create” a space and an architecture with their movement. The Belvedere was conceived as a public square in movement ... If you are looking for the sensation of “architectural spaces” or proportions in architecture, then [the museum] is deeply unpleasant, or better, it is a big, bad, ugly work; and this for me is the best praise, as I personally believe that architecture needs to be undressed from any architectural “attribute” ... content is to be created by man, by the community; an extreme act of humility by part of the architect ... The design for the Museu de Arte de São Paulo still has a big flaw: it is the one of being, in spite of my efforts, very much “architecture”.

These words convey the great complexity of the history of the MASP. Designed to respond to the ambitions of an institution and a highly visible site, the building was inevitably “very much” architecture. Bo Bardi recognized the friction between her design and the rationale behind it, yet what always mattered most to her was not the span but what it made possible – what remained unbuilt. On the one hand, the building is an impressive architectural icon; on the other hand, its greatest dream is that of disappearing. As both the exhibitor of culture and the stage on which culture is continually generated, the MASP, then, is not a compromise between opposing forces but the spark they ignite.



Presence and absence: the MASP span.  
Photograph by Leonardo Finotti