

Design cultures as models of biodiversity: design processes as agent of innovation and intercultural relations

Culturas do Design como modelos de biodiversidade: design de processos como agente de inovação e relações interculturais

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Abstract

The Latin network for the development of design processes in its First International Forum discusses whether or not there has been a rediscovery of Latin tradition, and the reasons behind local identities in the countries that create the network. We seek to understand the new axis of macro tradition that design culture springs from. At the same time, we verify whether the Latin linguistic-cultural tradition has provided a common base in which we can trace elements of permanence that are similar in each country.

Key words: design as a process, identity, Latin tradition, post-colonial approach.

Resumo

A rede latina para o desenvolvimento de um design de processos, no seu primeiro Fórum Internacional, discute a existência ou não houve uma redescoberta da tradição latina, e os motivos por trás de identidades locais dos países que criam esta rede. Procuramos entender o novo eixo de macro tradição na qual se origina a cultura do design. Ao mesmo tempo, verificamos se a tradição latina linguístico-cultural tem proporcionado uma base comum na qual podemos traçar os elementos de permanência que são semelhantes em cada país.

Palavras-chave: design como processo, identidade, tradição latina, abordagem pós-colonial.

Background

The normal evolution of the cultural debate that surrounds the design discipline is undergoing an acceleration and a deviation, bringing promise of a dismantling and reassembly of the knowledge and practices involved in certain areas of interest that seem to coincide with the main linguistic traditions of reference.

Various factors account for this hypothetical trajectory:

- the push towards globalisation in the markets, which forces a direct comparison among different production systems, stimulating competition and optimization of the dominant features of the various approaches;
- cultural universalization, which threatens to level out the distinctive identities of local communities, at the same time provoking a reaction of pride in and conscious protection of cultural identity;

- the development in emerging economies and, with it, the end of the Anglo-Saxon monopoly of services to industry, including design;
- the presence on the market of small and medium-size organisations and enterprises that are often capable of innovating much more quickly and effectively than the large organisations, typical of late capitalism;
- the breakdown of intellectual property protection, favouring processes of exchange and opening that help to fertilise intercultural trends;
- the renewed centrality of religious and civil traditions in the cultural processes that are behind great historic changes.

What is striking in this changing context is the break-up of the great monolithic design traditions (Scandinavian, Italian, German, English, American, Japanese) and the

reaggregation of practices and knowledge around new islands of relationships, which seem to find a cohesive element in linguistic tradition. This is the first hypothesis we intend to test by creating a context for debate and exchange of ideas among international experts and researchers in design, which we have called Forum.

We intend to investigate the common qualities that can be interpreted as structural components of this historically unified matrix. Art, literature, architecture and design have already in the past been the binding agent within this supranational community, and they seem to testify that a long tradition is consciously consolidating and taking shape. Processes of cultural exchange among Latin language countries have become common particularly during the 20th century, but we will verify whether or not they are connected in an infrastructural network, which doesn't imply relationship of subordination (typical of the colonial period).

An altered process

The first observation to be made is synthesised in Figure 1. The context where design is expressed has changed with time: over the last twenty years design has gone from being a specialised function of the production system, to a new position where it is independent from production and takes a directing role in the mediations that have always connected systems' productive functions to reproductive ones.

But the mediatory function has at the same time taken possession of the design initiative, becoming the spark that triggers the need for innovation and the master over decision-making. Observing today's production system – understood as the element that unites all actors – we find that design's place has moved toward the consumption side of the mediation process, reaching toward the possibility of producing *advanced design*, which means influencing the preconditions that determine innovation.

A second consequence of the change is that research, applied solely to the pre-design and pre-ideational phase of a productive process, loses its efficacy. The economic literature tells us that productive organisations centred on research are gaining ever greater importance, and that this makes it possible to invigorate every phase of the value chain.

In simpler terms, this means that design research must be adequate not only to pre-design but also to pre-development, pre-production, pre-distribution, pre-

communication, and so forth. Every stage of the value chain calls for design research.

The third important consequence we can observe in the production sectors that spearhead and guide the creation of trends in market behaviour is that they are increasingly influenced by innovation processes deriving from art and non-stochastic disciplines. For example, form and the study of form seem to prevail in these cases over the study of function.

At international level, companies that use design appear to be splitting into two broad groups: the *avant-garde*, which often utilise innovative processes that focus on meaning and form, and the followers, concentrating mainly on function and optimization of value along the production chain.

All of this has important consequences, both for the training area of design, and for the methods and processes that are the object of theoretical studies.

A reference map

This First Forum of the Latin network starts from the hypothesis described above, and proceeds with the search for common invariables that bring together the knowledge and expertise of design culture in Latin countries. To better illustrate this hypothesis we refer to Figure 2, which shows an input-output matrix for the contemporary design phenomenon (Celaschi, 2008).

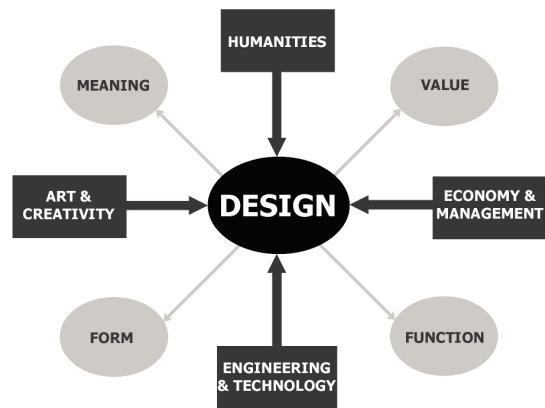


Figure 2. Input-output matrix for the contemporary design processes.

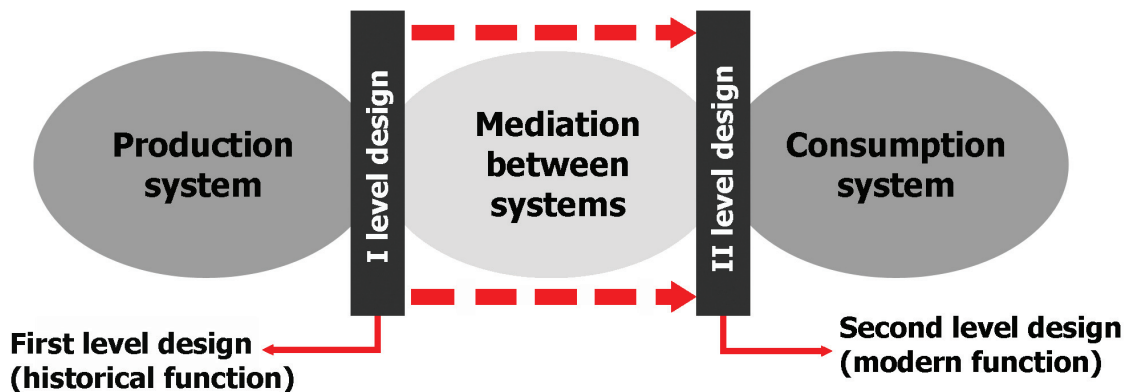


Figure 1. Position of design in the contemporary production system.

Figure 2 illustrates the four principle axes along which knowledge feeds design, and, at the crossroads of these four traditions, the aspects of the product that a designer must consider.

With respect to this scheme we will welcome differing viewpoints, as well as collecting concrete examples and case studies, statistical data and quantitatively significant observations that might indicate where the main factors of biodiversity between homogeneous design cultures can be placed.

Traditionally, the position of design in the classic production system was oriented towards function, with only a limited capacity to influence form and value (see Figure 3). Today we see a new tendency, particularly in Latin countries, to focus on the opposite direction, towards the meaning of products, with a margin of involvement in defining form and value.

This contrast cannot easily be reduced to one simple scheme, but nevertheless it provides a starting point for the work we will undertake in this symposium.

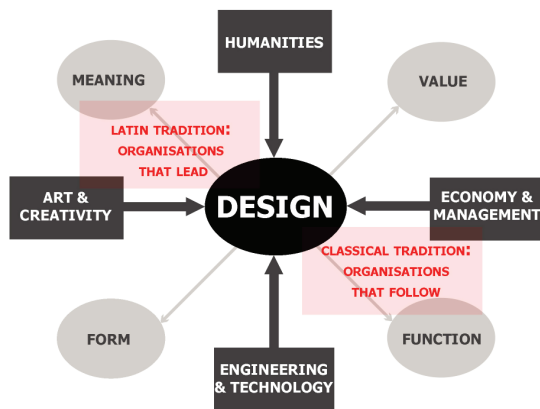


Figure 3. Hypothetical positioning of Latin tradition vs historical design tradition in classic industrial contexts.

A contradiction and a consequence

This hypothesis regarding the dynamics of design contexts in two contrasting traditions is even more interesting if we compare it to Figure 4, which highlights the progressive migration of design from the singular object to the identity of the brand itself.

Part of the research to be carried forward by the Forum will be focused on understanding how the Latin tradition, in positioning itself close to the relationship between art and humanities, is in reality still strongly tied to the product as hardware object. On the contrary, the Anglo-Saxon tradition has succeeded in evolving by working hard to overcome the crisis of the product as object and reevaluating its semantic and immaterial functions (for example in web and interaction design).

The individualism at the centre of many interpretations of the Latin cosmos is probably the cause of this contradiction, along with the absence of a visible system of reference (such as the Design Council in Britain) and an industrial system that is undercapitalised and little inclined to structural or infrastructural investment.

What is certain is the need to bring to the centre of attention in every tradition, but above all the tradition of Latin countries, the processes and the interpretation

of design as a process. It is the need to promote this awareness that inspires and animates the Forum, and we will try to detect signs of change in this direction.

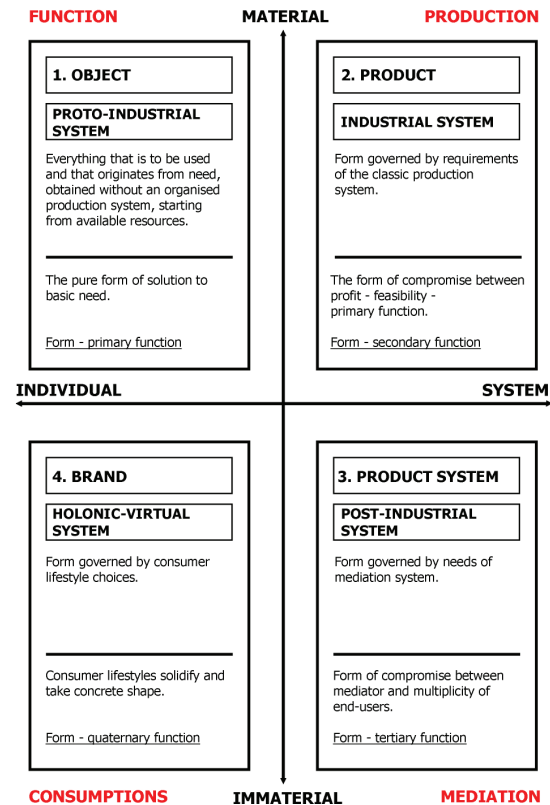


Figure 4. Emancipation of goods with respect to the association between form and function.

The Latin tradition: a historic round trip

In order to verify the existence of a rediscovered Latin linguistic and cultural tradition in contemporary design, we must first of all make an analysis over the long duration. The starting assumption is that a supranational Latin community has taken shape, nourished by a steady intensification of cultural exchanges and passages of information, guaranteeing the penetration and spread of knowledge and skills that have led progressively towards a shared cultural heritage, in large part thanks to the obvious linguistic affinity.

However, to analyse the evolution of contacts among the creative cultures of Latin Europe and Latin America, it is indispensable to understand the theoretical approach of the so-called *post-colonial studies* (Said, 1999; Bhabha, 2001; Spivak, 2004). Terms such as “hybridisation”, “lateral transfer”, and “symbiosis” must become part of the debate about design culture: they signal a departure from the classical assumption of a flow from above to below, from a dominant to a receiving (and inherently inferior) culture. Recent studies have demonstrated how the relationship between *centre* and *periphery*, two words that still today embody the colonial heritage, must be challenged in favour of a more complex and articulated process. In design, as in architecture, philosophy, literature and other forms of artistic expression, postmodernism spotlights this moment of fracture, showing a deep distrust of any universalising

language. A fruitful exchange between two or more cultures creates, according to this approach, a new product that is not simply a second-hand derivative, but something unique, with its own unequivocal identity.

An excellent illustration of this is the long and sometimes difficult process by which the European and American cultural contexts have accepted the contemporary design of Latin American countries. The discovery of the existence of a local professional tradition marks the historical debate of the 1940s, when the literature sought to identify a universal terminology within the continent's design experience. After the Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme in 1938, Brazilian architecture and design erupted on the international cultural scene, consecrated through initiatives by the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the American Institute of Architects. The result was the book *Brazil Builds* by Goodwin (1943), the catalogue of the MOMA exhibition illustrated by the rich iconography of George Kidder Smith. In 1939 the Museum acquired the famous "BKF" chair by Argentine designers Antonio Bonet, Juan Kurchan and Jorge Ferrari, showing a new opening toward Latin America. The progressive discovering of Latin American design continued in Europe after the Second World War, mostly thanks to the interest of Swiss architectural historian Sigfried Giedion, who believed that the Latin context could provide an alternative to the rigid rationalism of the inter-war period. According to his vision, the city of Brasilia was the point of arrival of a new urban approach (Giedion, 1965). More than fifty years after these first attempts at interpretation, which did however leave their mark on the critical fortunes of the vast Latin American design world, post-colonial studies tend on the contrary to analyse cultural exchange from a viewpoint that does not admit movement in only one direction: it is a round trip, with reciprocal cross-fertilisation, dialectical exchange, and shared growth.

But how do these exchanges take place? In what period did they begin? In what ways were architecture, design, art and literature influenced? Was there a moment when they became institutionalised? Certainly these processes took on many guises, involving a variety of actors and periods of time. As the historian Jorge Francisco Liernur asserts, the growing infrastructures of Latin America in the second half of the 19th century constituted a fertile ground for many European architects and engineers who experienced the myth of a professional "Eldorado", which continued to feed the imagination of the artistic avant-garde in the first half of the 20th century:

"Gustav Eiffel built churches and houses, Gottfried Semper was given the opportunity to explain his concept of theatre in the competition for the Rio de Janeiro Opera House, Pedro Benoit designed and built the city of La Plata, Francisco Tamburini built the Colon Theatre in Buenos Aires, Thomas Reed, the Capitol in Bogotá and Adamo Boari, the Fine Arts Building in Mexico" (Liernur, 1992, p. 87).

For the purposes of our analysis, we need to understand how particular situations, economic circumstances, or encounters that occurred in the fields of art, literature, architecture and design have been the spark that triggered reactions within the Latin cultural tradition, and that today can be considered as the historical precedent for a renewed intercultural vocation in contemporary design. Hence, we will try to identify some of the main contexts of exchange, focusing in particular on the Italy-Brazil channel. Here we will select case studies that are representative, if not exhaustive, in a period starting between the late 1920s and early 1930s, when the international artistic avant-garde movements came onto the scene.

Journeys and clients

It was 1929 when the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier, flying over the Argentine pampas and the Brazilian forest, was so fascinated by these lands (which he revisited in 1936, 1947, 1949, 1950, 1951 and 1962) that he dedicated to Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo an enormous design effort which marked the achievement of new professional goals.

More than a few people were curious enough to undertake the journey from Italy to Brazil in the early 1930s. The critic and art theorist Pier Maria Bardi, one of the foremost intellectuals during the Fascist period, made his first trip to Latin America from November 1933 to February 1934 as an envoy from the Foreign Ministry, to present an exhibition on modern Italian architecture at the Museo de Bellas Artes of Buenos Aires (catalogue: *Belvedere dell'Architettura italiana d'oggi*, Bardi, 1933). During the many stopovers of the "Oceania", the ship he was travelling on, Bardi had an opportunity to visit Recife, Salvador, Rio de Janeiro, Santos and São Paulo. He was deeply struck by the country, and by the *Avenida Paulista* so elegantly described by Zelia Gattai (1983) in her book *Anarquistas graças a Deus*. However, it was not Bardi, but rather the Swiss-Italian Alberto Sartoris, born in Torino and later emigrated to Geneva, who provided the impetus for the creation of a true "Latin network". Architect by training, but better known for his promotion of modern architecture, Sartoris travelled in Latin America during the same years as Bardi. His wanderings provided inspiration for the three-volume *Encyclopédie dell'architecture nouvelle* (1954), published starting from the late 1940s. With this work Sartoris included Italy among the protagonists of a greater "Latin" or "Mediterranean" order, and he excluded from its history the non-Latin countries, in other words England, Germany, the Soviet Union, Poland, and the Scandinavian countries. At the time of his journeys, Sartoris was part of the Futurist movement, and in fact Filippo Tommaso Marinetti was another explorer who, having gone to Brazil to export Futurism, was magnetised by the size of the country and the magic of its landscape. Not only did Marinetti introduce elements of local nature in one of his *Novelle colle labbra tinte*, but, through his lively correspondence with some Brazilian modernists, he also enriched the Italian cultural scene with news and information about the world on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. There were a few other noteworthy poet-

travellers who bridged the distance between Italy and Brazil, though they are marginal to our research: Ruggero Jacobbi, a bilingual poet who worked hard to popularise the Brazilian image in Italy; and Giuseppe Ungaretti, the Hermetic poet who taught Italian literature at University of São Paulo from 1936, forming solid friendships with local lyricists such as Vinicius de Moraes, who is best known in Italy as a singer-songwriter.

Another assiduous Brazilian traveller was one of the most unusual Italian designers, Roberto Sambonet. He lived his life immersed in the atmosphere of the family company, alternating with numerous journeys, to Sweden, China, Thailand, Brazil – and it was Brazil that marked a turning point in his work:

“The five years spent in Brazil from 1948 to 1953 represented a turning point and a maturing process [...]. The pervasive immanence of nature, the immediate correspondence between the human and cultural landscapes, the urgency and the possibility of inventing, were an alien universe that Sambonet embraced. He left Italy as a young painter, and returned as an artist and designer” (Morteo, 2008, p. 46)¹.

During the later post-war period, professionals travelled between Italy and Brazil partly in search of new commissions. Italian industry, in a phase of rapid expansion, saw in the South American continent not only a promising export market, but a place to establish whole production chains. A case in point is that of Olivetti, which in 1957, having reached a share capital of 10,800,000,000 lire, with 30 sales branches and 235 distributors in Italy, approved construction of a new manufacturing plant in São Paulo. The project was entrusted to renowned Milanese architect and designer Marco Zanuso, who had already worked with the Ivrea-based company. Also successful, although less visible than other celebrated Olivetti stores such as the ones in New York, Torino or Venice, were the sales outlets designed in São Paulo by the Italian emigrant Giancarlo Palanti in 1957 and 1958.

Finally, perhaps the best example of the fertile creative exchange taking place between Italy and Brazil is the work of the Brazilian-born architect Oscar Niemeyer. Because of professional difficulties following the 1964 *coup d'état*, in the 1960s he began collaborating with Italian organizations, one of the most famous of his works being the headquarters of the publishing company Edizioni Mondadori in Segrate, near Milan. Realised between 1968 and 1975, the building uses reinforced concrete to create a perfect synthesis between form and structure. The affinity between Italy and Brazil in terms of major architectural works had already become evident in the collaboration between the author of the urban plan for Brasília, Lucio Costa, the architect Ernesto Nathan Rogers, and the engineer Pier Luigi Nervi when they worked with Le Corbusier on the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, built by Nervi, Marcel Breuer and Bernard Louis Zehrfuss (1953-1958).

Exile and migration

According to a 2008 survey by the Historic archives of Italian emigration, a few years after the Second World War Italian emigration to Brazil began to rise again; in fact Brazil was the third destination of choice, preceded only by Argentina and Venezuela. In 1946 only 603 Italians emigrated (as against 97 repatriations) while the following year the number exceeded 4,000 (with 1,142 repatriations) and in 1951 there were 9,000 emigrants (with just over 2,000 repatriations). In 1952-1954, 17,026, 14,328 and 12,949 emigrants respectively left Italy for Brazil, while the total of repatriations during the same three-year period was only around 10,000. Emigration began to diminish in 1955 (8,523 emigrants and 2,592 returnees), but it stayed at over 1,000 yearly until 1962 (Archivio Storico Emigrazione Italiana, s.d.).

Obviously this trend also involved intellectuals and professionals: in 1948 architect Enrico Tedeschi arrived in Argentina; architect Ernesto Nathan Rogers travelled from Argentina to Peru, holding conferences and creating the foundation for interesting Italo-Argentine editorial projects; architect Luigi Piccinato was commissioned to build new residential developments in Buenos Aires; and engineer Pier Luigi Nervi was a consultant on the University City of Tucumán. Two case studies are of particular interest to us at this Forum: the husband and wife team Pier Maria and Lina Bardi, and Giancarlo Palanti.

Pier Maria Bardi, after immigrating to Brazil in 1946, founded and directed the São Paulo Museum of Art on the invitation of the Brazilian magnate Assis Chateaubriand. The new museum building was designed in 1957 by his wife Lina Bo, a Roman architect who collaborated with Gio Ponti from 1940 to 1943 and in 1943 served as director of “Domus”, one of the most important Italian architecture magazines. Her first Brazilian projects were undertaken in collaboration with Palanti through the Palma Atelier (1948-1951), a sort of multi-disciplinary laboratory producing all kinds of applied arts: jewellery, furniture, architecture, theatre sets, and even published materials. Palanti was another promising Italian architect, involved in the 1930s with a group of young rationalists who were followers of Giuseppe Pagano and Edoardo Persico and who contributed to the magazine “Casabella”. From 1946, after his move to São Paulo, Palanti undertook a long and productive career in Brazil, designing more than ten buildings before his death in 1977. Bo Bardi, after designing her own house (the Glass House, 1951), began conducting research into low-cost and social housing, taking a particular interest in the problems of mass production and technology. During these same years Italians became involved in the Bienal de São Paulo (biennial art exhibition), instituted in 1951 by the Italian Brazilian industrialist Ciccillo Matarazzo (1898-1977) and second in importance only to the biennial exhibition in Venice. Palanti exhibited in 1953, while at the fifth edition in 1959 Bo Bardi presented the exhibition “Bahia” (with Martim Gonçalves), inspired by her experiences in the city of Salvador de Bahia, where she moved in 1958. Across the ocean at the Biennale d’Arte in Venice, Brazilian works

¹ Translated by the translator of the article.

were constantly on display starting from 1950. At that time there wasn't yet a Brazilian pavilion; one was designed in 1959 by Enrique E. Mindlin, Palanti and Walmyr L. Amaral and finally built in 1964. Among the figures present at Venice during these first years were Emiliano Di Cavalcanti (1956), Candido Portinari (1954), Alfredo Volpi, a native of Lucca who became a naturalised Brazilian, Mario Cravo (1960), Iberé Camargo (1962), Franz Krajcber and Franz Weissmann (1964), and Maria Bonomi.

Describing the "Bahia" exhibition, Jorge Amado wrote in 1959:

"It is the first important show of Northeastern popular art. With its floor of dried leaves, its large Orixás, its patchwork covers, its everyday objects, it communicates [...] all the poetic violence of a world that is still intact" (in Bo Bardi, 1995, p. 47).

Following on Amado's words, we would like to reflect on Bo Bardi's efforts to bring to light a hidden side of Brazil. Describing the result of her researches in the period spent in the Northeast of Brazil, in 1980 she wrote:

"What is the situation of a country with a capitalist-dependent structure, where the national democratic-bourgeois revolution never really took place, as it enters industrialisation with the remains of an oligarchic-nationalist structure?" (in Bo Bardi, 1995, p. 15).

Opposing the savage and indiscriminate imported industrialisation taking place in Brazil, she commented on the need for

"a re-examination of the country's recent history. [...] The recognition of the popular Brazilian civilisation is necessary, even if it is poor when judged by the standards of high culture. This is not the balance of folklore, always paternalistically protected by high culture; it is the balance as seen from the other side, the participatory balance" (in Bo Bardi, 1995, p. 15-16).

Basing her work on the rediscovery of an anthropological richness unique to Brazil, Bo Bardi rejected, on one side, "the return to craftsmanship as an antidote to an industrialisation that is foreign to the cultural principles of the country", and, on the other, the technological imperative and the trivialisation of the Bauhaus movement's success. She believed in

"The artist's freedom [...] that is conscious of social responsibility, that breaks down the boundaries of aesthetics, the concentration camp of western civilisation" (in Bo Bardi, 1995, p. 18).

In 1965 Italy was ready to welcome the message of this artist-designer, when the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Rome was to hold the exhibition "A Mao do ovo Brasileiro" featuring the popular art of Northeastern Brazil. But on the eve of the inauguration, the embassy was ordered to suspend everything. In an article in "Espresso" magazine entitled *Are the generals afraid of poor people's art?*, distinguished Roman architectural historian Bruno Zevi denounced this new form of violence by the Brazilian military dictatorship and declared his support for Bo Bardi, who had decided to include images of the recently finished Brazilian capital alongside the other objects in the exhibition.

"In her judgment Brasilia represented a movement away from the former colony's coastline, racial integration, the courage to introduce Brazil to the world using the cultural values of the poor, in short, an irreversible act of liberation and breakage from the past. On one side, the people's artistic production, testimony to the infinite sufferings of the negro, and on the other side, the Kafkaesque city, authoritarian and exhibitionist. These opposite poles today seem like parallel manifestations of the same subversive spirit"² (in Bo Bardi, 1995, p. 50-51).

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² Translated by the translator of the article.