

# H-Net Reviews

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**Fernando Luiz Lara.** *The Rise of Popular Modernist Architecture in Brazil.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008. xvi + 149 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3289-4.

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## Architecture in the Hands of the People

Ever since Oscar Niemeyer and Lucio Costa built the Brazilian Pavilion for the 1939 New York World's Fair, American architects have been fascinated by Brazilian modernism. While the historiography of modern architecture has, generally speaking, marginalized Latin American architectural production, it has acknowledged the formal innovations accomplished by Costa and Niemeyer in their attempt to adapt the modern architectural idiom—characteristic of the Bauhaus or architects like Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe—to the specifics of the Brazilian context. Key exhibitions and their publications (including the Museum of Modern Art's *Brazil Builds* [1943] and, more recently, the Guggenheim Museum's *Brazil: Body and Soul*, [2001]) have addressed the paradigmatic work of these two architects and the unique modern, international style of architecture that they produced. Despite this, little or no attention has been paid in the United States to the other Brazilian architects and their contributions. This, however, is changing. Recently more works that address the general lack of information on and interpretation of Latin American architecture are beginning to appear and thus are expanding the limited scholarship available on other Brazilian architects.

Fernando Luiz Lara's recent book is an example of this new scholarship on Brazilian architecture. However, what *The Rise of Popular Modernist Architecture in Brazil* does is more important than simply addressing the lack of material on the paradigmatic work of the

great Brazilian architects. It centers its analysis on the completely ignored popular architecture of Brazil instead of the reigning episteme of Brazilian architecture represented by the well-known and recognized forms of architects like Niemeyer and Costa. This book presents the heretofore unacknowledged influence of modern architects in Brazil on the popular architecture of that country. What is important about this is that popular forms of modern architectural production—by laypersons, building trades people, etc.—are generally not considered in architectural survey texts and in the general historiography of architecture despite their complexity and their formal and theoretical richness. Lara's book fills an important gap in our understanding of the production of architecture by the population at large and, in this case, of the specific history of that production in Brazil. More specifically and importantly, it details the role of modern and paradigmatic architecture in that popular production; showing how architecture is seen, understood, and reproduced by the population at large.

Centered in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, the popular modern architecture that Lara investigates shows the influence of the well-known and recognized forms for the outlying development of Pampulha. Here, architect Oscar Niemeyer in 1942 built a series of paradigmatic buildings around a lake that included a casino, chapel, yacht club, and dance club for the then mayor of Belo Horizonte, Juscelino Kubitschek. But Niemeyer's work did more

than show the debt to the international style of architects working at the time in Europe. It reveals his radical transformation of that model to incorporate baroque and/or organic curvilinear forms and new structural and material expressions (including the traditional azulejo tiles). What is more, Niemeyer's architecture illustrates a more articulated spatial relationship between the interior architecture and exterior gardens (primarily designed by the landscape architect Roberto Burle-Marx). The popular expressions of this architecture, however, vary differently from their models in the ways that they were conceptualized, designed, and manufactured by the public. While the models Niemeyer proposed suggested radical changes of inhabitation, spatial and formal relationships, and high economic investment, their popular counterparts tended to focus, primarily, on the "image" of modern architecture. As Lara shows, for the people who built their houses based on these models, this aesthetic reflected their desire to express a modern status without necessarily accepting the required and proposed social, spatial, or economic changes suggested by their avant-garde counterparts. In short, the popular architecture maintained the traditional structures of living and organization of nineteenth-century housing.

The question that arises is: how was the desire for a modern self-expression generated? Lara's investigation shows how modern architecture was disseminated to the public primarily through the media, through well-known imagery, and through governmental incentives and support. As a result, architecture became transformed into an image whose meanings not only corresponded to popular interests and desires to appear modern, but also represented an exalted form of status and modern nationalism through modern architecture's expression of "order and progress." Lara's analysis of popular magazines and popular trade journals gives us the beginning clues of how the popular media affected the consumption and reproduction of architectural models, forms, and materials through primarily aesthetic and media-produced images and means. In addition, Lara's documentation and diagrams of the facades of many examples

of this popular architecture and his analysis and comparison with the plans, elevations, and photographs of the buildings designed by Niemeyer show us how the well-known and important precedents were transformed into the realm of the quotidian. While the general "flavor" of the avant-garde architectural forms remains, the incorporations as well as the nuances by which laypersons modified them—for personal, idiosyncratic, and traditional reasons—show that the modernist aesthetics were not imposed but rather accepted and transformed as part of cultural and economic concerns. The reasons for this become clear through interviews with the original users and designers of the popular architecture that Lara discusses. They provide us with a clear understanding of how the builders interpreted and mediated modern architecture to address their particular needs and desires while responding to their traditional family lifestyles, structures, and interests.

As noted earlier, the use and development of modern architecture and forms by the masses is also something generally unaccounted for in the history of architecture (especially as it applies to Latin American architecture). While Lara's investigation discusses broader historiographical and theoretical issues of modernity—as it was broadly accepted and developed in Brazil—and the relationship between popular and high-art forms of modernist expressions, the book focuses its essential questions on how the language of modern architecture became interpreted by the "non-native speakers" who, in turn, created out of their reading a truly unique "language" or architectural manifestation. Lara's book also provides the specific reasons why a modern architectural vocabulary was adapted within popular forms of architectural production and the theoretical repercussions of this on the architectural profession and the history of architecture.

In the end, *The Rise of Popular Modernist Architecture in Brazil* suggests that Brazilian architecture should be understood from the forms and urban environments that the people, as a whole, imagined and created and not only from what the masters designed and built.

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