
Latin American Architecture – Oscar Niemeyer

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Introduction:

“Latin American” defined by the American Heritage Dictionary as – countries of the western hemisphere south of the United States, especially those speaking Spanish, Portuguese, or French and includes countries such as Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Mexico, Uruguay, Brazil, and Venezuela.

For the purpose of this report Brazil will be the focus with in depth discussion on the influence Oscar Niemeyer has had on Brazilian architecture.

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A Brief History

In Brazil, modern architecture had its origins in the mid-1920's partnership of Lucio Costa and Russian, Gregori Warchavchik, who had been influenced by Futurism during his studies in Rome. They were responsible for the first cubistic houses in Brazil. In 1936 Le Corbusier had direct impact on South America when acting as an advisor for the design of the new building for the Ministry of Education and Health in Rio de Janeiro. Among those influenced by Le Corbusier were Oscar Niemeyer, Affonso Reidy and Jorge Moreira. Oscar Niemeyer is considered the most important Brazilian architect of the 20th Century because of the quantity and quality of his buildings. He played the leading role in modernist architecture that encouraged plastic expression. He is probably recognised most by his association with the design and planning of Brasilia, the capital of Brazil with Costa, a city unique in the world for its unity in design and concept.

Niemeyer assimilated the style and theories of Le Corbusier, adapting them to his native Brazil in buildings such as the Ministry of Education and Health (which was a search for a new cultural symbol), the Obra do Berco and his own house (his first independent building). Both Le Corbusier and the Brazilian baroque style in architecture that was championed by Costa, heavily influenced the series of buildings he created till 1942. After this he went beyond the rational architecture of Le Corbusier and the rectilinear geometry of International Style to develop pioneering, free form modernism that was uniquely Brazilian. In the 1950's after travelling to Europe, Niemeyer developed bolder more disciplined styles. In Europe, he designed an office for Renault and in Italy, the Mondadori Editorial Office in Milan and the FATA Office Building in Turin. In the Algiers, he designed the Zoological Gardens, the University of Constantine and the Foreign Office. According to Haider "these buildings mark a period of creativity on modern symbolism". Other buildings include the Communist Party in Paris and a cultural centre for Le Havre and collaborating with Le Corbusier on the United Nations Headquarters in New York and the Caracas Museum in Venezuela and an Aeronautical Research Centre near Sao Paulo. Niemeyer's influence on world architecture and dissemination of his ideas evolved during his exile from Brazil from 1960-1968 to France because of his political affiliations with the Communist Party. When the military dictatorship ended he returned to Brazil teaching at the University of Rio de Janeiro and working in private practise. Niemeyer is recognized as one of the first to pioneer new concepts in the area recognised as Latin America.

In 1956 Niemeyer was appointed architectural adviser to Nova Cap – an organization charged with implementing Luis Costa's plans for Brazil's new capital, Brasilia. The following year he became its chief architect, designing most of the city's important buildings. Costa was important to Niemeyer and the evolution of Brazilian modernism because he valued collaborative interaction and led to Niemeyer's best works. Niemeyer's collaboration with the then president Juscelino Kubitschek allowed his impact on the nation's architecture.



Brasilia City View – designed and
planned by Costa & Niemeyer 1957
<http://user.chollian.net>

Underwood (194:17) describes Niemeyer’s career as reflecting a set of related contradictions; a Communist architect outspoken about the exploitation of the masses yet willing to create monuments for the people in power, a design philosophy attuned to local sources – “the intimate warmth and curving sensuality of the tropical Brazilian place” – yet committed to an utopian impulse that has created places of reinforced concrete; a design approach concerned with physical appearances yet preoccupied with symbolism; “a movement determined to change society through architecture and an architect convinced that architecture can only reflect a society that he cannot change; a sensibility steeped in the notion of liberty and independence and an architecture controlled by a forced and all-encompassing unity”.

Philosophy

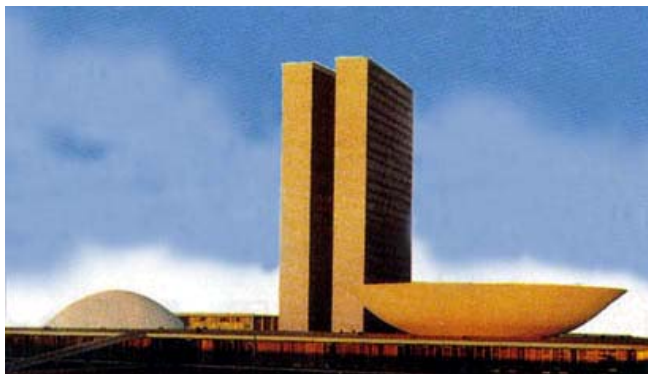
Modernist architecture claims to be an international movement that advanced national development by building new kinds of cities, which in turn transform daily life. (Holston 1989; 10) The modernism movement did not start as a worldwide phenomenon and when it found its way to countries such as Brazil problems underlying its philosophy occurred, namely

- geographical
- relevance of forms in a new context – what’s relevant to downtown Manhattan may not be appropriate to Brazil - what should be kept and what should be transformed to match climate, culture, beliefs, technologies and architectural traditions and
- if you accept the new ideas which ones do you throw out - indigenous or old or do you fuse the two?

Brazilian architecture has developed as a result of a complex cultural process, architects both Brazilian and immigrants have contributed to its growth. Architecture has been an expression and instrument for modernisation in Brazil. De Guimaraens (2003) sees contemporary Brazilian architecture based on the ideals of rationalism and organicism and Underwood (1994; 12) as an interaction between two forces – the modernist discourse and the Brazilian milieu.

Niemeyer states “Architecture must express the spirit of the technical and social forces that are predominant in a given epoch; but when such forces are not balanced, the resulting conflict is prejudicial to the content of the work and to the work as a whole. Only with this in mind may we understand the nature of the plans and drawings.....” [Frampton (1992; 256)] resulting in designs with an artistic gesture, underlying logic and substance. (Haider)

Oscar Niemeyer stated in his acceptance speech for his Pritzker Architecture prize in 1988 that “a concern for beauty, a zest for fantasy, and an ever-present element of surprise bear witness that today’s architecture is not a minor craft bound to straight-edge rules, but an architecture imbued with technology: light, creative and unfettered, seeking out its architectural scene.” He quotes Charles Baudelaire as saying “the unexpected, the irregular, the surprise, the amazing are an essential part and characteristic of beauty.” (www.pritzkerprize.com). Niemeyer describes Brazilian

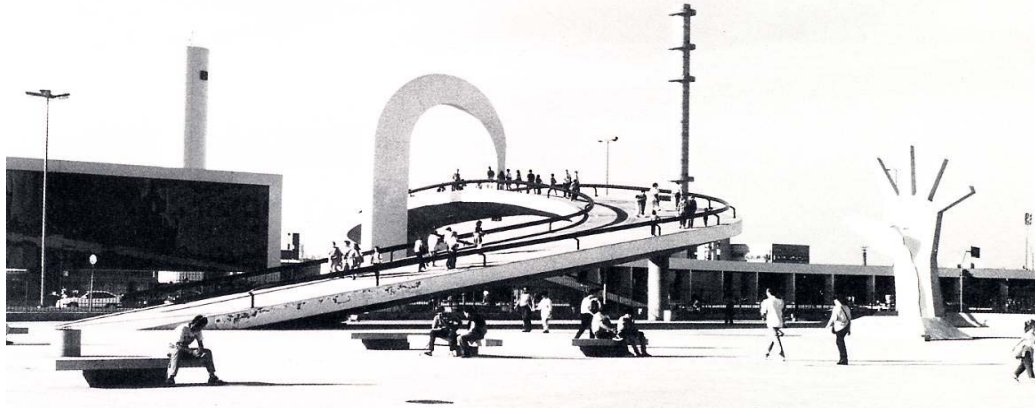


(http:user.chollian.net)

architecture as “aesthetic functionalism” according to which “form follows beauty”. “When a form creates beauty, it becomes functional and then fundamental in architecture” [Underwood (1994; 92) quoting Niemeyer] These beliefs and philosophies are evident in Niemeyer’s work as exemplified by Sun-

Struck Towers on a wind swept plaza in Brasilia. Niemeyer’s conception of architecture as lyrical sculpture is anchored as much in Costa’s appreciation of the colonial baroque as in LeCorbusier’s poetic vision. Underwood (1994; 15)

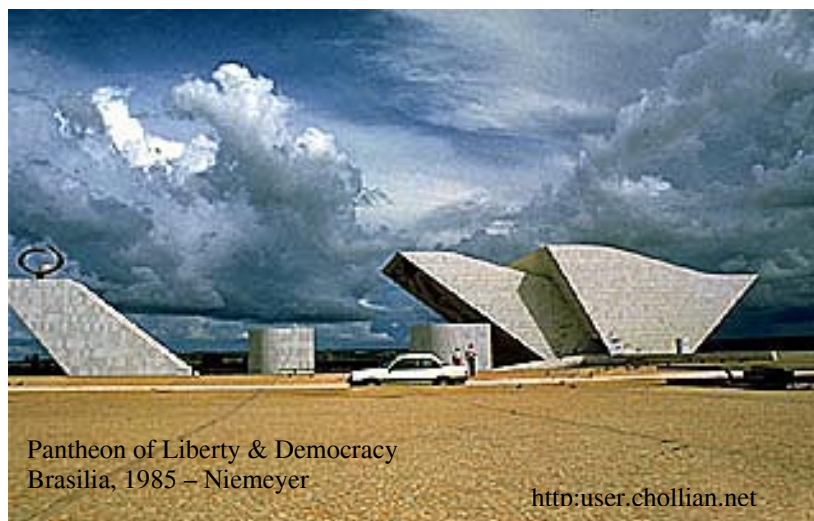
Underwood (1994; 16) also believes Niemeyer’s architecture of the 1980’s and early 1990’s reveal the contradictions of patronage and social intention. His recent works illustrates how his “architecture has functioned sometimes as an escape valve for social frustrations, sometimes as a gratification of the whims and political ambitions of elite patrons, and sometimes as both. A freer, surrealist style characterizes there projects; the Memorial da America Latina in Sao Paulo and the Museu de Arte Contemporanea in Niteroi.”



Memorial da America Latina, 1989, with bleeding hand and suspended pedestrian bridge Underwood (1994;194)

It has been described by Underwood (1994:195) as displaying surrealist tendencies and sculptural intensity, its goal is to express a sense of Latin-American cultural unity.

Niemeyer describes his designs as “my architecture followed the old examples, the beauty prevailing over the limitations of the constructive logic. My work proceeded, indifferent to the unavoidable criticism set forth by those who take the trouble to examine the minimum details, so very true of what mediocrity is capable of.” (www.pritzkerprize.com) In Brasilia he tried to find a structural solution that would characterise the city’s architecture often isolating buildings to better emphasise them , whilst in his own home ‘Canoas House’ his philosophy is described as “that of free movement of the individual in intimate communion with a timeless nature” Underwood (194;82)

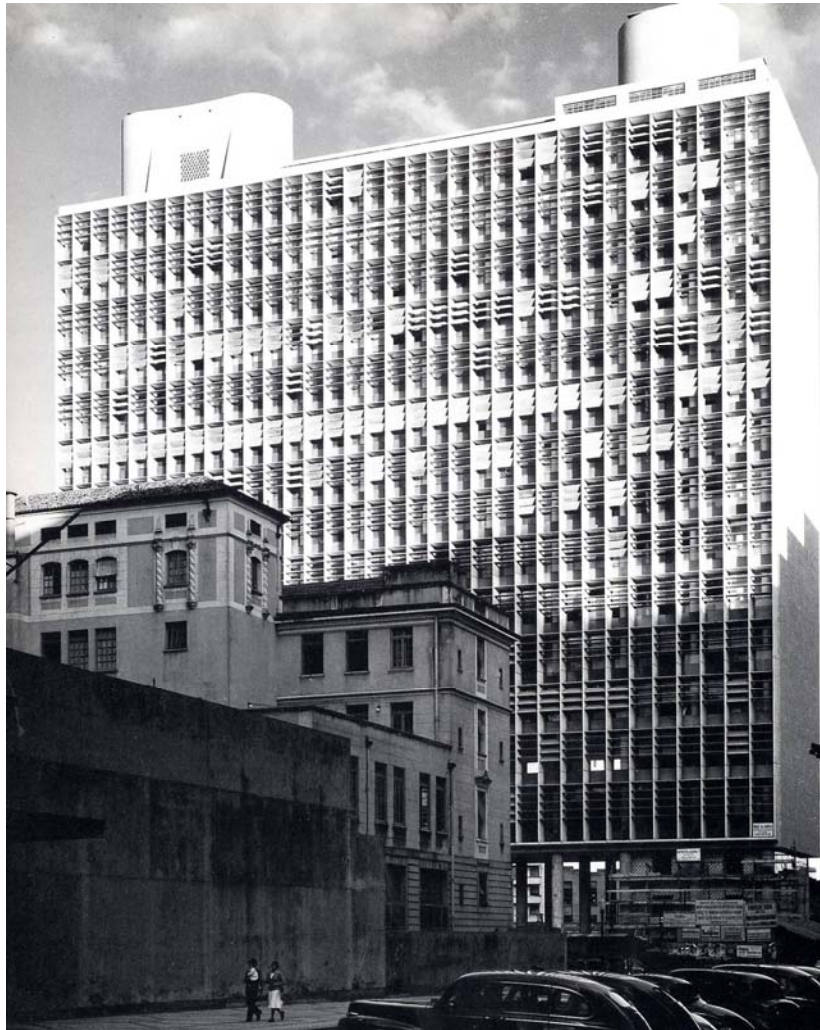


Pantheon of Liberty & Democracy
Brasília, 1985 – Niemeyer

<http://user.chollian.net>

Design Methodology

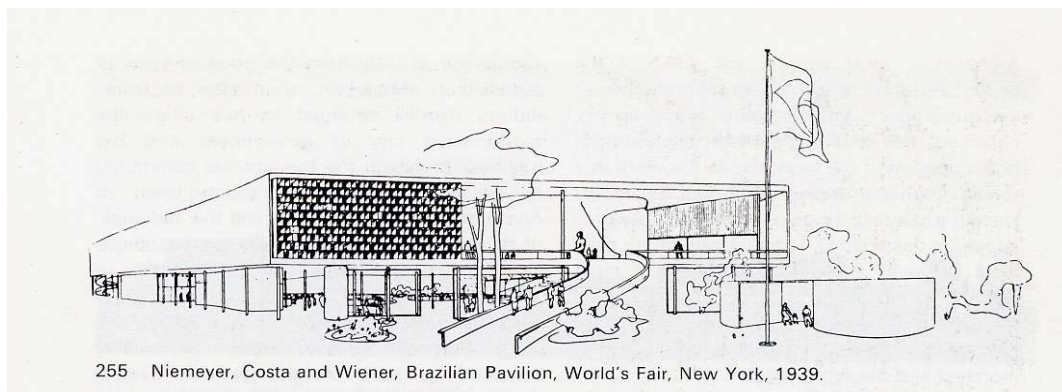
Initially Costa and Niemeyer used Le Corbusier as a starting point especially as he collaborated in the design of the building of the Ministry of Education. Despite the final solution departing significantly from Le Corbusier's initial sketches it was the first monumental application of Corbusian elements. According to Frampton (1992; 254) these included the use of a peristyle of pilotis, the toit-jardin, the brise-soleil and the pan-verre.¹ Although these elements were altered Curtis (1991; 333) states that they “hardly constituted an all-out attempt at designing a tropical regionalist architecture”. It was not until latter in the century that Brazilian architecture developed as a style of its own.



Ministry of Education & Health building, 1936-43, north façade
Underwood 1994; 21

Frampton believes the Brazilian followers of Le Corbusier transformed these Purist components into a highly sensuous native expression that echoed the 18th Century Brazilian Baroque, (192; 254) with Oscar Niemeyer being the most successful exponent of this rhetorical manner. He brought Le Corbusier's concept of the free plan to a new level of fluidity and interpenetration which was demonstrated in his Brazilian Pavilion for the 1939 New York World's Fair (collaborated with Paul Lester

Wiener & Costa) which was initially planned around an exotic garden court of Brazilian flora and fauna that had been designed by Burle Marx.

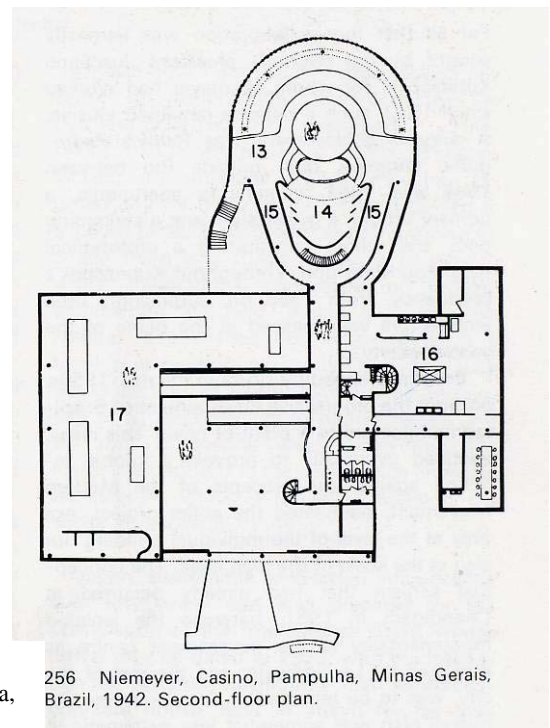


Frampton (1992; 255)

In the Casino at Pampulha Niemeyer reinterpreted the Corbusian notion of promenade *architecture* in a spatial composition of balance and vivacity. Frampton (192; 255) has described it as a narrative building from the welcoming double-height foyer to the gleaming ramps rising to the gaming floor; from the elliptical corridors leading towards the restaurant to the backstage access to the dance area; “in short, an explicit promenade which articulated the space of the building as the structure of an elaborate game, a game as intricate as the habits of society it was intended to serve.” The restaurant had complex access ways reminiscent of a labyrinth, established routes and class roles of clients, entertainers and serving staff. The building had a severe theatrical atmosphere, a contrast in mood established by the facades faced in travertine and juparana stone and the interior lined with pink glass, satin and brilliantly coloured panels of traditional Portuguese tiles. It now serves as an art museum.



Oscar Niemeyer, restaurant at Pampulha, Brazil. 1943



Frampton (1992; 255)

The Corbusier influence is evident in the early works of Niemeyer, however according to de Guimaraens he gradually acquired his own style: the lightness of the curved forms, created spaces that transformed the architectural scheme into something that was unknown; harmony, grace and elegance. The adaptations produced by Niemeyer connected Baroque vocabulary with modernist architecture with the architecture of Brasilia demonstrating his contemporary approach. The concave and convex domes of the National Congress and the columns of the Alvorada and Planalto palaces and the Supreme Court are original features. Lacy (1991; 168) describes his buildings as the “distillation of colours and light and sensual imagery of his native Brazil” whilst Tafuri & Dal Co (1974:354) see his designs as an attempt to “mould his architectural objects as sequences of unexpected events, spectacles of the absurd, euphoric fragments of nature crystallized.” Scenography is often an end in itself. Niemeyer uses reinforced concrete to form curves or a shell and straight line to create skyscrapers, exhibition centres, residential areas, theatres, temples, head office buildings for public and private sectors, universities, clubs and hospitals. Its malleability and readily available ingredients make it a natural alternative to steel.

In their citation to Niemeyer for his Pritzker award the jury described him as an individual who “captures the essence of that culture and gives it form.” His pursuit of great architecture is linked to the roots of his native land has resulted in new plastic forms and a lyricism in building, not only in Brazil, but also around the world. (www.pritzkerprize.com)

Examples of some of Niemeyer’s work



Palacio do Plan Alto Brazil – Supreme Court – demonstrates formal harmony and spatial monumentality

Tafuri & Dal Co (1976: 346)



The Obra do Berco in Rio de Janeiro demonstrates Niemeyer's commitment to finding solutions to buildings erected in a tropical environment. He introduced adjustable vertical louvres (brise-soleil) to the building to control the heat from the tropical sun



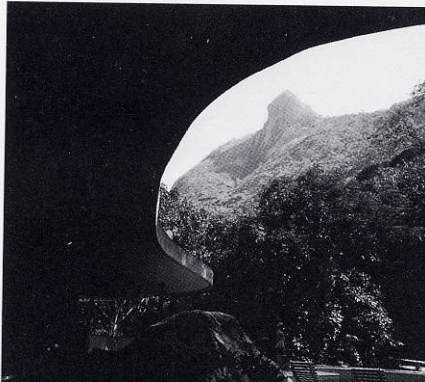
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The Great Cathedral Brasilia (1960-1970) has had its interior likened to sunshine. The entrance that lies in the shadows leads the believers from the darkness into the light. The exterior has been described as the thorn crown of Jesus, a blossom and praying hands.

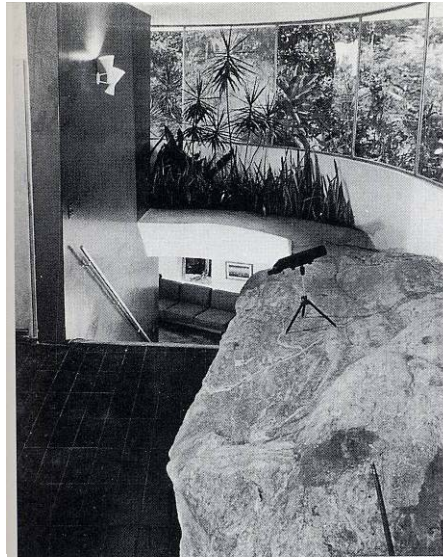
Niemeyer's Canoas House

Underwood (194; 82)

Canoas House, Rio de Janeiro, 1953–54,
canopy against mountains



Basic shelter opens to and in harmony with nature



66. Niemeyer,
Canoas House, Rio de Janeiro, 1953–54,
boulder and stairway to lower level

Boulder
symbolises
timeless
geological process
to create
landscapes



Interior view of Canoas House

Underwood (1994; 89)

The bedrooms are a cave like retreat away from heat or rain and noise of Rio de Janeiro, though still aware of the outside through the inside. Niemeyer's house has been described as free-form organic and classical; the major formal elements are the forms of nature - the sand and water of the concrete slab, the water of the pool, the boulder, and the vegetation.

Personal Assessment

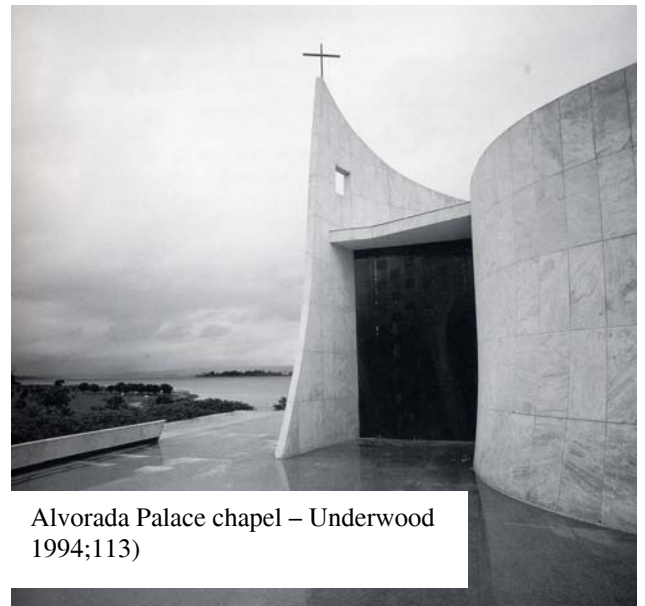
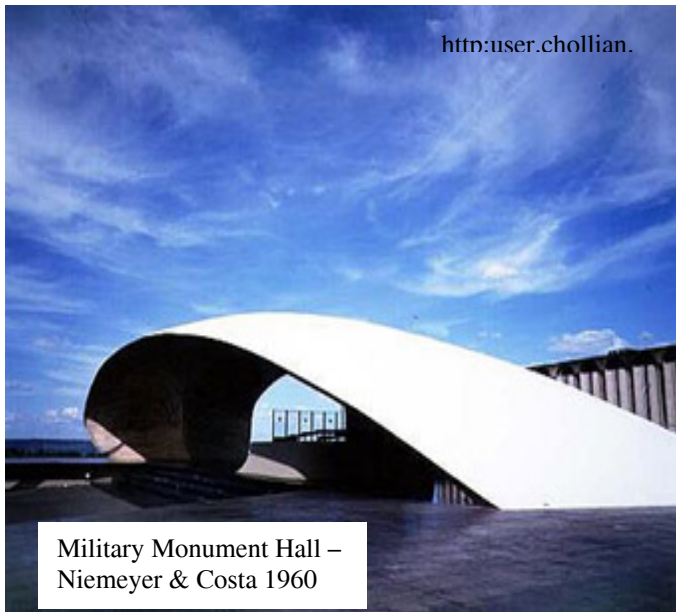
The name Oscar Niemeyer is not bandied as a world influence in architecture by the general public like the names Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier are. This is explained by Underwood (1994;10) who believes “appreciation of contributions by Niemeyer has no doubt been hindered by a cultural ethnocentrism prevalent in Europe and North America that tends to dismiss Latin American achievements as derivative, peripheral and generally inferior.” In general one would have to agree with this observation.

Niemeyer’s development as a person is represented in the development of his ideals and buildings. Underwood’s (194; 16) assertion that his architecture is a “contradiction of patronage and social intention” is valid, his buildings often act as a reflection of power and prestige – imparting the impression of permanence and might of the occupants, their invincibility. This is no better seen than by the development of Brasilia where various critics have both praised and criticised the concept.

Criticism of Niemeyer’s work has included the condemnation of his Palace of Industry in Sao Paulo by Max Bill (Frampton 1992:257), who described it as “a riot of anti-social waste, lacking any sense of responsibility toward either the business occupant of his customers.....for such works are born of a spirit devoid of all decency and all responsibility to human needs.” His housing development for the masses in Brasilia would also deserve such condemnation. It has created social problems and shanties on the periphery of the city. Another deserving this condemnation is the Maison de la Culture, which is according to Niemeyer a reflection of the climate, history and architecture of the site, yet I personally find it objectionable to the eye as it creates an impression of a nuclear reactor, which is far from beneficial to the community. However, buildings such as the Military Monument Hall and Alvorada Palace chapel inspire a sense of awe, a symbol of civilisation, a permanent expression of cultural values; a sense of longevity and peace.



Maison de la Culture
Underwood 1994; 179



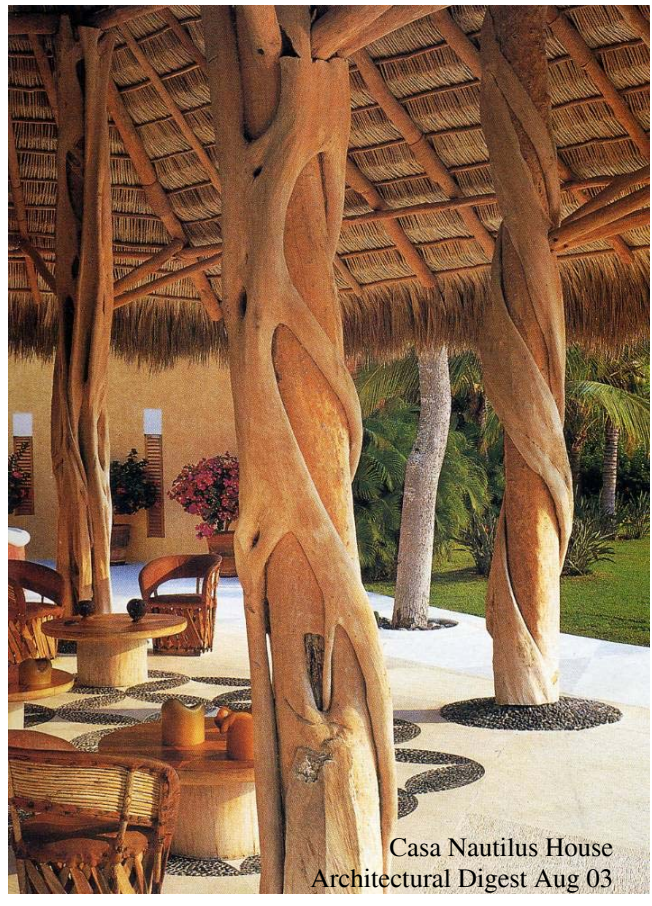
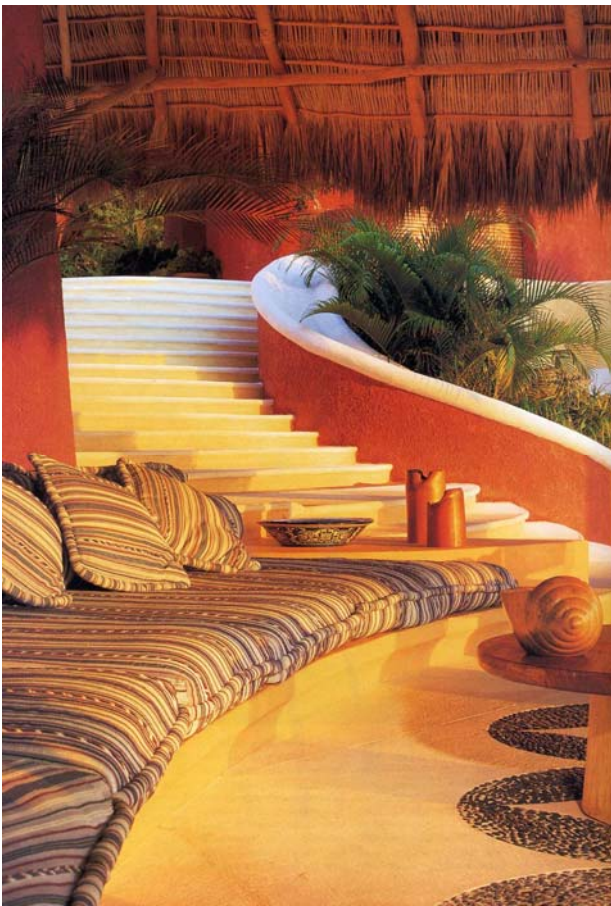
Although Niemeyer is not exalted like architects such as Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright his influence is apparent in modern day design. Even at the age of 96 years he was still impacting on the world where he completed a temporary pavilion for the Serpentine Gallery in London. It is one of a series of pavilions erected each year on the gallery's lawn to celebrate the work of a significant contemporary architect.



Serpentine Gallery Pavilion Kensington London

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Niemeyer's desire to merge vernacular design with modern lifestyle is emulated by many architects around the world, for eg Possenbachers, Casa Nautilus house; Mexico is full of surprises, curves and has a definite sculptural form. It is an attempt to suit the climate and environment - be in harmony with its surroundings.



Casa Nautilus House
Architectural Digest Aug 03

Niemeyer attributes the curvilinear expression of his work to the beaches, hills and women of his hometown Rio. Even the South Australian architect Max Pritchard's Nankivell House, Victor Harbour, 1991 (Houses Issue 33, 2003) shows Niemeyer's influence. It is a house with a strong sculptured quality achieved by using concrete with an area to protect it from the elements. It is a building responding to the landforms around it, appearing to be shaped by the forces of nature - a definite characteristic of Niemeyer's ideals. His belief that architecture, technology and nature be integrated with the natural elements of the site tend to create curves and sculptural forms, beauty is paramount.



Niemeyer's career is definitely linked to the politics and social issues of the times creating buildings that will be remembered as monuments to the society in which they were built and others as empty concrete white elephants, whatever your feelings regarding his work it has impact!

Notes:

1. Le Corbusier's 5 points of New Architecture

- i. Pilotis – central element from which others evolved, lifts building off the ground allowing landscape or traffic to pass underneath, supports weight of building allowing interior and exterior wall to pass anywhere according to functional demand or aesthetic intention
- ii. Roof garden – intended to reintroduce nature to city, also supplied ways of insulating flat concrete roof
- iii. Free plan – allowed rooms of different sizes to be slotted into skeleton and spaces to be orchestrated in sequence
- iv. Free façade – could be a total void running from slab to slab, thin membrane or a window of any size
- v. Ribbon windows

Curtis (1991; 113-114)

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