

# THE SPACE OF APPEARANCE WITHIN THE MEGALOPOLIS: ARCHITECTURAL CULTURE- POLITICS OF SÃO PAULO 1957-2017

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There is perhaps no more compelling example of Hannah Arendt's "space of appearance" than Lina Bo Bardi's Museum of Art in São Paulo, MASP, designed in 1957 for the Assis Chateaubriand art collection previously housed in an old downtown building. Although the work of the Italian émigré architect Lina Bo Bardi was always independent of the so-called Paulista School, the audaciously monumental structure of her museum, suspended clear of the ground from two deep, long span reinforced concrete beams resting on four equally gigantic reinforced concrete piers, served to create a partially covered terrace, opening off the Avenida Paulista and overlooking the verdant landscape of Trianon Park. Ever since its completion in 1968 which happened to coincide with the worldwide student revolt, this space has served as the ultimate Paulista symbolic site for spontaneous political demonstrations. As an Arendtian cultural nexus with a similar political potential Bo Bardi's museum will be matched at virtually the same time by a top-lit, equally monumental core incorporated into the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism built on the campus of São Paulo University to designs of the architect João Vilanova Artigas, between 1959 and 1961. The result, in both instances was the creation of a *res publica* that corresponded, however inadvertently, to Arendt's concept of "the space of appearance," as first defined by her under the rubric *work* in her magnum opus *The Human Condition* of 1958:

The manmade world of things, the human artifice erected by *homo faber*, becomes a home

for immortal men, stability of which will endure and outlast the ever-changing movement of their lives and actions, only inasmuch as it transcends the sheer functionalism of things produced for consumption and the sheer utility of objects produced for use. Life in its non-biological sense, the span of time each man has between birth and death, manifests itself in action and speech...If the *animal laborans* needs the help of the *homo faber* to ease his labor and remove his pain, and if mortals need his help to erect a home on earth, acting and speaking men need the help of *homo faber* in his highest capacity, that is the help of artists, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all. In order to be what the world is always meant to be, home for men during their life on earth, the human artifice must be a place fit for action and speech, for activities not only entirely useless for the necessities of life but of an entirely different nature from the manifold activities of fabrication by which the world itself and all things in it are produced.<sup>1</sup>

Although Arendt never alludes to the megalopolis *per se*, which in any case in the late 50's had yet to be acknowledged this is the "placeless" landscape she foresees in *The Human Condition* when, in the fifth chapter, she defines the "space of appearance" in the following terms:

The space of appearance comes into being whenever men are gathered together in a manner of speech and action and therefore precedes all formal constitution of the public realm...Only where potentialities of action are always present can power remain with them and the foundation of cities which, as city states have remained paradigmatic for all Western political organization is therefore the most important prerequisite for power...Power preserves the public realm and the space of appearance and as such it is the life blood of the human artifice... Without being talked about by men and without housing them, the world would not be a human artifice but a heap of unrelated things to which each isolated individual was free to add one more object... without the enduring permanence of the human artifice there cannot be any remembrance of things that are to come with those that shall come after...<sup>2</sup>

And it is also much the same megapolitan landscape she has in mind when in her later critique of consumerism, she writes:

In our need for more and more rapid replacement of worldly things around us we can no longer afford to use them, to respect and preserve their inherent durability, we must consume, devour, as it were, our houses and furniture and cars as though they were the good things of nature which spoil uselessly if they are not drawn swiftly into the never-ending cycle of man's metabolism with nature. It is as though we had forced open the distinguishing boundaries which protected the world, the human artifice, from nature, the biological processes which goes on in its very midst as well as the natural cyclical processes which surround it delivering and abandoning to them the always threatened stability of the human world.<sup>3</sup>

In the last chapter of *The Human Condition*, entitled the 'Vita Activa and the Modern Age,' Arendt touches on the socio-economic consequences of the mass ownership of the car without which the demise of the city and the emergence of the megalopolis would not have been possible.

If, in concluding, we return once more to the Archimedian point and apply it, as Kafka warned us not to do, to man himself and to what he is doing to this earth, it at once becomes manifest that all of his activities, watched from a sufficiently removed vantage point in the universe, would appear not as activities of any kind but as processes, so that as a scientist recently put it, modern motorization would appear like a process of biological mutation which human bodies gradually begin to be covered by shells of steel. For the watcher from the universe, this mutation would be no more or less mysterious than the mutation which now goes on before our eyes in those small living organisms which we fought with antibiotics and which mysteriously have developed new strains to resist us...we live

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in this society as though we were as far removed from our own human existence as we are from the infinitely small and the infinitely large which, even if they could be perceived by the finest instruments, are too far away from us to be experienced.<sup>4</sup>

The Arendtian ideal of the city-state was not only predicated on the remote model of the ancient Greek *polis* but also on the or worker's councils that emerged spontaneously in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution of 1917, only to be instantly suppressed by the triumphant Bolsheviki party. Arendt's other example of council formation were the groups formed during the Hungarian Revolt of 1956, which she equally admired and which were also summarily suppressed. Perhaps no one has understood Arendt's concept of direct democracy better than Shmuel Lederman in his study *Hannah Arendt and Participatory Democracy* of 2019 wherein he wrote:

Ultimately, the different way Arendt conceptualized the meaning and the potential of the councils emanated not so much from historical idiosyncrasies as from the different ontological and epistemological foundations of her political thought namely from the way she "politicized" German existentialism and used Heidegger's phenomenological method to offer a strikingly original analysis of the experience of action and speech in the public sphere.<sup>5</sup>

Later, Lederman cites two recent examples of participatory democracy: first, the Indian state of Kerala, which, had, in the past, been under a democratically elected communist government and second, the city of Porto Alegre in the South of Brazil. Of this last Lederman writes:

... In the spirit of the council tradition, participatory budgeting in Puerta Alegre continually challenged the very structure of hegemonic representative democracy...participatory institutions now play a role channeling demands emerging from organized communities;...the blurring between state and society occurs as government officials and community leaders now occupy a space within state institutions...(in recent years 100,000 residents have taken part) in a process prioritizing public works, such as street paving, the laying of water and sewerage lines, the building of new schools and hospitals and so on.<sup>6</sup>

As the title of this essay intimates, "spaces of appearance," in a cultural if not an overtly political sense, have intermittently appeared over the

years within the exceptionally vast and placeless megalopolis of São Paulo. Such spaces have been an intrinsic part of the urban culture of São Paulo since the foundation of the SESC organization (the Serviço Social do Comércio; EN: Social Service of Commerce) in 1945, which was conceived from the outset as providing a certain sector of workers with beneficial social, recreational and cultural facilities. The socio-cultural agenda of this welfare provision was first given an architectural formulation in the so-called SESC Pompeia designed by Lina Bo Bardi in 1977, in collaboration with Marcelo Ferraz. This work entailed the conversion of a disused, single story factory in the center of the city into a complex combining multiple facilities, including an 800-seat restaurant, a reading room, a library, a 750-seat theatre and a dental clinic. Bo Bardi would add to this same complex a new multi-story sports center, housing among other facilities a gymnasium and indoor swimming pool. This new addition was built out of exposed, in situ reinforced concrete in manner of Le Corbusier's *béton brut*. Its multi-story, silo-like form, linked by ramps to a concrete access tower, was given an industrial character so as to appear as if it had always existed in relation to the original single-story, monitor-lit factory. The interstitial space between the two was landscaped in such a way as to provide a nominal, artificial "beach" in which users could sun bathe.

This achievement was echoed in 2017 by the realization of another SESC complex within the São Paulo megalopolis; the so-called SESC 24 de Maio built to the designs of the late Paulista architect Paulo Mendes da Rocha, who collaborated with one of his former pupils, Maria Moreira, a founding partner in the practice, MMBB. Here again we have the of SESC commissioning the re-use of an existing structure, this time a disused department store which since it was largely ruined had to be extensively rebuilt. Apart from providing the usual mix of SESC amenities, the entire work was predicated on the

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heroic idea of building a large swimming pool on top of an existing 13-story structure. This daring engineering concept was predicated on supporting the pool and the rest of the building on four gigantic reinforced concrete columns, each measuring 1.2 meters in diameter. These four columns were centered on the four corners of a square, set within the virtual square of the original building with a continuous pedestrian access ramp rising up to one side of the column grid. The pool on the roof was surely a manifest improvement on the narrow “urban beach” which had been a key feature in the SESC Pompeia. The *raison d’être* behind this seemingly counter-intuitive decision to place the heavy weight of the pool at the top of the building would be accounted for by the architect in the following:

The pool chooses its place not the architect. A sunny, open pool, despite the winter, is completely different from a closed, heated pool. My image is Copacabana, Leblon, Ipanema!<sup>7</sup>

In a conversation with the Chilean architect Enrique Walker in 2018, Mendes da Rocha will make the ideological stratagem of the Paulista School of Architecture explicit, in his response to Walker’s question as to the political implications of the SESC 24 de Maio, when he remarked:

Every project is a political statement. The project idea is one of projection of the future. So, the intention is to imagine what we should be, what we can be. The design is not simply a matter of architecture... Generally speaking, society throughout the world is exclusive, in principle. It always protects itself from free public action: these are the famous gated communities, the buildings with security. We made this building open to public use as much as possible. And SESC comes into that as well, which tells us something about SESC policies. So, everything we do has a political value; there is a political essence in the idea of decision. And the new occupation of an existing building is part of a very interesting policy linked to the economy. You are better off reusing buildings rather than discarding them ... Every construction, every action of ours has value, a political essence, which must be read between the lines of what is there... in architecture in particular, the first thing it entails is to seduce others so that they can see the dimensions of what, despite the circumstances we must do.<sup>8</sup>

Among the architects practicing in São Paulo over the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there has perhaps been no figure who has been more aware of the profound challenges posed by the São Paulo megalopolis, now covering a

million square kilometers with a population of 30 million people, than Paulo Mendes da Rocha. As he put it at an earlier moment when the population stood at 20 million: “it would have better to have built ten cities of 2 million each.” For Mendes da Rocha the megalopolis has been a challenge that can only be significantly addressed by creating public spaces, within which to resist the overwhelmingly disjunctive “non-place” of the megalopolis, not only in terms of culture-politics but also psychologically. Hence his penchant for creating microcosmic public realms such as his *Poupa Tempo*, the so-called “time-saving” building realized in the center of the city in 2008. The Swiss architect Annette Spiro’s appraisal of this work encapsulates the ennobling quality of this mutual interface between the general public and the municipality; a building that in effect serves as a range of offices for the granting of licenses and the payment of rates, taxes and fees, etc. In her view: “what could have easily been a labyrinth of bureaucracy is exactly the opposite; a singular 300-meter-long space, a bridge, an airy hall, an elongated public square...By virtue of one grand gesture, urbanistic, functional and spatial intentions are cogently satisfied.”

In this one work one is able to appreciate fully the underlying ideology of the São Paulo school of architecture as this was initially envisaged by the architect, João Vilanova Artigas and the historian-theorist, Flavio Motta; that is to say the accommodation of socio-cultural and politically progressive programs within the fabric of tectonically articulated, monumental form. It is this that surely accounts for Mendes da Rocha’s assertion that engineering and architecture should be one and the same, although he would be the first to concede that this tectonic ethos is not, in and of itself, able to serve as an adequate point of departure before the dystopic fragmentation of the megalopolis for, as he would put it: “A city’s memory is not a continuous accumulation of eternities. It can only be preserved

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in its historical discontinuity. We have to have the courage to face this inevitable discontinuity and turn it into stimulus.”<sup>10</sup>

In this regard Mendes da Rocha’s capacity to imagine and create spaces of public appearance would be particularly challenged in 2000 when he received from both Rio de Janeiro and Paris separate commissions to design sports facilities as part of their rival bids to host the Olympic games of 2008. What is significant about these two quite different proposals, with the one much more extensive and ambitious than the other, is that they were both designed for the worldwide megalopoli, i.e. for universal placelessness just as prevalent in the urbanistic chaos surrounding the Hausmannian core of Paris, as it is throughout the vast extent of the São Paulo megalopolis and where the one would consist of a number of different interventions on multiple sites, the other consisted of a single large stadium related to a pre-existing canal and podium of smaller stadia accommodating various specialized sports, i.e. the so-called “sports boulevard.” What Mendes da Rocha had to say about his various proposals for the urbanized region of São Paulo emphasizes the potential opportunity provided by the games as an incentive for the reconstruction of city form. As he would write of his piecemeal project of repairing the degradation of megalopolitan fabric around São Paulo:

... It proposes to intervene in places that today, despite their effective urban structuring are nonetheless degraded, as happens in all the world’s dynamic cities, with railway stations, unwanted polluted waterways and unexpected empty lots. Thus, the proposal envisages the urbanization of abandoned areas, weaving houses, with new leisure, health and education facilities right into the existing urban fabric.<sup>11</sup>

There are perhaps no two works from the middle of the last century having more disparate implications than Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* of 1958 and Jean Gottman’s *Megalopolis* of 1962 for while Arendt’s concept of “the space of appearance” may be seen in retrospect as being of importance for the practice of architecture, Gottman’s relevance resided in the fact that he was the first to recognize that the urbanized region was already an emergent and universal condition. This, is ever more the case today as we veer towards the urbanization of 75% of world’s population by 2050, according to the three-volume study *The Endless City*, published by the London School of Economics in 2007. In this regard, it may well be that Brazil in general and São Paulo in particular proffer a range of socio-cultural interventions that are of particular pertinence today given the inevitable wholesale urbanization of the planet. I have in mind in the first instance



the extraordinary capacity of Paulista municipality to build a large number of school-cum-community centers for the poorest sectors of society. There is surely no school building program of comparable stature and speed of realization anywhere else in the world today. This exceptional achievement suggests that even under globalized capitalism there is much to be said for the potential of the city state or the urbanized region to overcome the political ‘non-place’ of the megalopolis in its most alienated form. This much seems to be implied by Chantal Mouffe’s recent thesis of *Agonistics*, first published in 2013 as a political stratagem to overcome the current impasse of representational democracy. In this she cites with approval the political philosophy of the Italian intellectual, Massimo Cacciari, who having served twice as the mayor of Venice, recommends a future policy in which he advocates “federation from the bottom” as opposed to the current union of European nation states which although they derive from representational democracies, are nonetheless subject to the top-down regulatory power of the European Union. In her appraisal of Cacciari’s thesis, Mouffe writes:

What Cacciari advocates can be conceived as a type of federal union in which the component units would not be limited to nation states and in which the regions would also play an important role. From the point of view of an agnostic model for Europe, I find particularly interesting his claim that such a union would manifest a form of autonomy exercised in systems which are integrated in a conflictive mode, and that it would combine solidarity and competition. Incorporating Cacciari’s proposals, we could imagine a European Union that would not only be a demio-cracy composed of nation states, but one where there would be a multiplicity of different kinds of demio, where democracy could be exercised at different levels and in a

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multiplicity of ways. Such a view recognizes and articulates different forms of collective identities and their new modes of co-operation.<sup>12</sup>

Of equal consequence as “spaces of appearance” has been the exemplary policy pursued by the city during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century wherein it would realize an extensive program of school building throughout the far-flung periphery of the city, situating these schools in the midst of center-less *favelas*, that is in the heart of spontaneous, self-built housing settlements, dating back from the 60’s, as they are to be found throughout the fringes of the city. Twenty-one such schools were built by the city under the mayoralty of Marta Suplicy who was affiliated with Lula da Silva Worker’s Party during his first presidency, 2003-2010. Since then another twenty-five schools-cum-community centers have been built under the rubric of Centros Educacionais Unificados (EN: Unified Educational Centers) or CEUS. These large complexes incorporate a wide range of supplementary social services including theatres, cinemas, sports facilities, nursery schools, kindergartens, vocational high schools, dance halls, swimming pools, clinics, etc. CEUS were also conceived as accommodating university extension courses which would be coordinated by the Federal Government. Largely designed by the architect’s department of municipality under the leadership of Alexandre Delijacov, André Takia and Wanderley Ariza, these educational complexes now distributed throughout the periphery of the city constitute potential “spaces of appearance” in a political sense.

All of this incorporates, in so many respects, the essence of Paulista architectural culture-politics made manifest throughout the conurbation, notwithstanding the traumatic political changes to which Brazil has been subjected over the past seven decades. In this regard it is significant when it comes to the megalopolitan proliferation of free-standing objects it is significant that Mendes da Rocha invariably worked at two different scales; on the one hand, at the scale of microcosmic intervention, such as his *Poupa Tempo* building or his Arc of the Patriarch of 2007 and, on the other, at the continental scale of the territory at large. A measure of this was evoked by Mendes da Rocha in his 1980 proposal for the regularization of the Bay of Montevideo in Uruguay of which he wrote:

The straightened lengths of the bay front are focused on the water, and provide new recreation areas in the form of gardens, plazas, theatres, cinemas, cafes, restaurants. Transformed into a city square on water, 3 km across between Cerrito Hill and the harbor and lying between different city districts and centers, the bay bustles with light passenger traffic and makes a lively and sophisticated impression. At a remote

and delightfully situated point in the bay a tiny island was transformed into a theatre, after the manner of the Venetians. Perhaps one night an inexpressibly haunting melody from its shores will linger over the city. Who knows it would be even like Villa-Lobos's, Floresta do Amazonas.<sup>13</sup>

However improbable and costly such a modification would have been, it would have afforded a new territorial datum capable of unifying the placeless megalopolis surrounding the Bay of Montevideo throughout its perimeter. It is of the utmost importance that the architect should have conceived of his intervention in terms of giving rise to auditoria and their attendant "spaces of appearance" without which architecture, as the most material of the arts, has no socio-political cultural significance.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Second Edition), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1958]), 173-174.
2. Ibid., 199-200.
3. Ibid., 125, 126.
4. Ibid., 322, 323.
5. Shmuel Lederman, *Hannah Arendt and Participatory Democracy. A Peoples Utopia* (Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 185.
6. Ibid., 200.
7. Andres Lepak and Daniel Talesnik, *Access for All. São Paulo's Architectural Infrastructures* (Zurich: Park Books, 2019), 189.
8. Lepak and Talesnik, *Access for All*, 193.
9. Annette Spiro, *Paulo Mendes da Rocha. Works and Projects* (Zurich: Niggli, 2002), 27.
10. Rosa Artigas, *Paulo Mendez da Rocha, 50 years*, (New York: Rizzoli, 2007) 24.
11. Ibid., 85.
12. Chantal Mouffe, *Agnostics* (London: Verso, 2013), 53.
13. Spiro, *Paulo Mendes da Rocha*, 162.