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A Decolonial Approach to Brazilian Design: Lina Bo Bardi's Contribution to Embracing Projects

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This article tries to answer these questions. It suggests the need to delve into the history of Brazilian design, and it points towards an alternative approach to modernity – mainly, a different understanding of the enterprises that forged histories, policies and lifestyles in the last centuries. Fortunately, there are tools for that. For design, the first and probably most important tool is the evidence and arguments that present Brazilian design long before the 1960s.

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Karin Vecchiatti

I. Introduction

In recent years, it is common to associate a *decolonial perspective* to different areas of design. This occurs mainly when one thinks of a "Brazilian approach" to design. The discussion becomes heated when it is followed by other questions: who are, after all, the people who create Brazilian material culture, generating products-services-communications? The idea of a decolonial approach to design still questions the aesthetic and functional standards reproduced for so many years by many local creative professions: why does it seem so difficult to break the white-centering predominance both in academia and in the design market? How can original, popular, local or "unerudite" knowledge be taken as a starting point and not just as something to be copied or studied in various projects? To what extent are projects, products, material goods and services actually accessible in places that lack original solutions?[1]

This article tries to answer these questions. It suggests the need to delve into the history of Brazilian design, and it points towards an alternative approach to modernity – mainly, a different understanding of the enterprises that forged histories, policies and lifestyles in the last centuries. Fortunately, there are tools for that. For design, the first and probably most important tool is the evidence and arguments that present Brazilian design long before the 1960s. The second tool is the difference between *design as program* from *design as project*, admitting that the first dominated design strategies since the beginning of the 20th century and discarded design as social artifact or, in other words, as a continuous process of becoming projects. The third tool for understanding modernity and the history of design from another perspective is an analysis the relationship between popular and industrial Design. This proximity was experienced by the Bauhaus, but erased by the corporate worlds's forceful drive throughout the 20th century; in Brazil, the same proximity was also envisioned by Italian-Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi in the 1960's, while trying to establish the Museum of Popular Art in Bahia.

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[1] https://hhmagazine.com.br/epistemologia-decolonial-uma-ferramenta-politica-para-ensinar-historias-outras/

These three perspectives (an approach to Brazilian design history considering an alternative look towards modernity; the differences between *design as project* and *design as program*; and an analysis of the relationship between popular and industrial design) are discussed in this article in an attempt to reveal charecteristics of Brazilian design and, above all, to pave the way for a more inclusive, comprehensive and significant design production in the near future.

II. An Alternative Look Towards Modernity

To develop an alternative look at what modernity has achieved, one has to start understanding different knowledge systems and practices – especially those that were excluded by the modernizing thrust. When it comes to design, this involves knowing and understanding the past of Brazilian design and emphasizing how fundamental it has been in the building our material culture.

> As long as designers continue to ignore the rich and fertile historical legacy of design that has existed in our culture for a century or more, they will be doomed to discover gunpowder and to reinvent the wheel at each new generation. Worse than that, they will be choosing to remain trapped within the narrow limits of a concept approach towards design, trapped within an aging modernity that still manifests itself in false dichotomies such as form/function, product design/graphic design, appearance/use, art/design, market/society. (CARDOSO, 2005, p.37)

A key contribution for understanding the past of Brazilian design is art historian Rafael Cardoso's work *Brazilian Design before Design*. In it, the author explains how the development of design in Brazil was not immune to colonial thinking; how it was extremely influenced by modernity's narrative on rationalization and progress. This drive ended up discarding the so-called "popular" knowledge and began considering the 1960s as the "beginning" of design in Brazil. Cardoso, however, shows that already in the 19th century there were a series of design activities with a high level of conceptual complexity, technological sophistication and enormous economic value, applied to the manufacture, distribution and consumption of industrial products (CARDOSO, 2005).

Nevertheless, there are reasons why Brazilian design activities prior to the mid-20th century were conveniently overlooked:

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(1) Between the 1950s and 1960s, Brazil began to participate in a new world economic system, and this drive was seen as an opportunity to create a new model for the country – a model of "the future", breaking away from an archaic slaveholder past.
(2) Furthermore, the growing presence of multinational companies in the country helped spread a dominant model of globalized corporations. Since then, the corporate world has been imposing itself as an absolute truth, as the "only" viable means of production, ruling out so many other possibilities.

These factors helped to diminish the importance of projects that preceded the 1960s, mainly separating Brazilian design from the idea of social artifact and considering valid only a very particular area of project development: *the program*. To reinforce the transition towards a modern Brazil, it became much more logical to see design as a concept, profession and ideology and to diminish the importance of social bonds behind each project.

This transition took shape from the second half of the 1950's and early 1960's, during the process of accelerating the industrial and urban development of some Brazilian cities, which opened the field for new experiences in design. At that time, three major design schools and reference centers were founded: ESDI - Superior School of Industrial Design (*Escola Superior de Desenho Industrial*), in Rio de Janeiro; courses related to industrial design coordinated by architect Vilanova Artigas in São Paulo University's School of Architecture (FAU-USP) and the School of Visual Artes in Belo Horizonte (*Escola de Artes Plásticas de Belo Horizonte*), in Minas Gerais. Establishing design as an area of knowledge made sense and complemented the very important idea of progress for the country.

In 1951, even before ESDI and FAU-USP, art patron Pietro Maria and architect Lina Bo Bardi created the Contemporary Art Institute (*Instituto de Arte Contemporânea*/IAC), conected to the newly established São Paulo Art Museum (MASP). With new courses (photography, fashion, architecture models, advertising and design), IAC brought to Brazil a series of principles established by the Bauhaus in Germany. Again, this happened at a time when technological-industrial transformations were very welcome in the country, emphasizing the drive to leave behind knowledge linked to a traditional past.

The result of these actions, mainly through design activities linked to production and consumption on an industrial scale, brought a turning point in Brazilian design history. It can be suggested that, little by little, the possibility of considering the practice of *design as project* was discarded and an approach of *design as program* began to be much more valued. Thus, a "programmatic" version of design became predominant, losing a proposition that pays more attention to the complex development of material culture and to the social bonds that support it.

III. Design as Project and Social Artifact

Contrary to what this programmatic version of design tends to emphasize, material culture, symbols, two-, three-dimensional or digital objects produced for centuries by human beings tell the history, reveal connections, textures and processes of a people and their culture. Material culture is not restricted to its uses or functions. If, on the one hand, each object is, at each moment in history, "the result of the balance between normative forms", it is also "all the time a process in becoming" (BARTHES, 2005, p.259).

This process can only be perceived insofar as design practices are linked to the idea of social artifact, which shows the social construction behind each object: how they influence and are influenced by people's lives and behaviors and how they reveal the economic, political and technological context in which they are produced. Therefore, to think of *design as social artifact* is to face a more complex idea than that of *design as form-function*. It is closely linked to the idea of *project as a historical-social becoming*: flexible, changeable, capable of learning and adapting; very different from the idea of *a project as program*: fixed, rigid, incapable of making concessions.

With time, the industry-progress-globalization paradigm began to value the *programmatic side of design* and radically diminished the importance of projects understood as the *process of becoming*; of creating our material culture. This lead the historical-social products that were made under certain "popular" conditions almost to oblivion. Design as project takes into account the context that influences the materials and techniques used; it dwells into the uses and meanings assigned to each product. It considers objects-services-communications not as something ready-made, in its forms and meanings, but rather, as a result of processes related to the way society is organized, its ways of life and its cultural values. If today we are looking for a "Brazilian design", if we question hegemonic aesthetic standards, then it is essential to pay attention and understand the social mechanisms that create the predominant forms, colors, textures and uses (or functions) and to understand why so many others end up being left out. (MOTA, no date)

Unfortunately, the *programmatic version* of design thinking that largely guided the work of multinationals in this "modern country" sought to erase the history behind the making of objects. But it is precisely these forgotten stories that need to be told so that design does not cease to be project or social artifact; so that one remains connected to the continuous experience of everyday life and learning. It is

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mainly through rescuing these stories that one could begin to address the themes that permeate a possible decolonial design and in fact to question the aesthetic and functional standards reproduced in recent decades by the creative professions. It is certainly this rescue that would offer an alternative look to understand modernity.

IV. When Design is No Longer Project

Art historian Giulio Carlo Argan (1998), when addressing architecture and design, drew attenion to the crisis that resulted from *projects* turning into *programs*. He named it the "object crisis" or the "programming crisis". One of the reasons that triggered this crisis is project practices relying too much on totalizing thoughts and planning, thus becoming a program. It is the moment in which the *intention of becoming* as the core of project making, became rigid.

It is never enough to remember that the avant-garde movements that influenced design in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century participated in this transition. They often created visual and material products that brought the belief that planning a perfect society would be entirely possible. To a certain extent, early 20th century design translated certainty in progress visually and materially, as if it were enough to employ a fixed plan to stimulate the progress of society. The ultimate aim of the modern utopia was to create perfectly planned societies, changing unsatisfactory situations and healing the world's ills.

Over the years, however, the utopia of perfectly planned societies was gradually replaced by the disuse and obsolescence of modern theories. Seeking to fix chaos caused by the industrialization of cities, seeking to solve society's problems, modern utopia unleashed a crisis whose epicenter was precisely in the ideas it intended to defend: 1) the belief in a concept through which one can plan a perfect society and 2) the idealization of planning itself, facing it as a rigid structure, as a fixed and unchangeable plan. The problem is that these ideas left out many others, which were not even considered by the modern propulsion.

In Design, the program as pre-calculated and almost mechanical procedure started replacing projects. If, on the one hand, projects are an integrated process linked to the development of society as a historical becoming, programming presents itself as a strategy for overcoming history, dangerously taking away from individuals all choice and decision making, giving them to power structures (ARGAN, 1998).

According to Argan (1998), the object crisis spread to the postmodern world, a world in which programming (supposedly) continues to ensure the well-being of humanity (Argan, 1998). The difference is that since the last decades of the 20th century, the program has no longer been based on the rigidity of the (modern) concept, but rather on capitalist hegemony, especially on financial capital (postmodern) of globalized multinationals. And design was not immune to this transition: it surrendered to the principle of a supposed freedom of commercial expression and (almost) lost its ability to … design.

V. One Needs to Embrace Projects Once Again

The restlessness presented at the beginning of this article suggests that design needs to go back and embrace projects. This requires, perhaps more than at other times, the need to create new relationships and perceptions with everyday life. It is about paying more attention to strategies that are created through learning processes. Embracing projects is what defines design in dialogue with the rest of life; that is open to random interactions and, above all, that is available to encounters that can shape and change behaviors.

Embracing projects translates itself into an invitation for designers to recognize themselves in different identities, to understand and value different knowledge and practices and to get to know and create different aesthetics. The first Bauhaus professionals tried to do this. Architect Lina Bo Bardi in Brazil's mid 20th century also tried. And current designers need to try one more time. Otherwise, design will remain stuck with programming.

If the early years of the Bauhaus seemed to follow a project approach towards design, the school's efforts to renew the formal and social potential of design were neutralized years later by the corporate culture that its descendants ended up attending (LUPTON, 2009). This path led to assumptions of objectivity and universality in design, something spread by modern thought in the West; it was only decades later that different minds started acceping the idea that communication is not as universal or impartial as one would like. All communication is loaded with principles and values that make such "universality" and "objectivity" almost impossible to achieve (PATER, 2020).

This alternative vision was in part brought by *Bauhaus Imaginista,* a 2018-2019 exhibition that toured different cities around the world, celebrating the Bauhaus' centenary. In São Paulo, Brazil, the exhibition had a subtitle: "Mutual Learning". Inspired by post-colonial studies, the exhibition presented a revisited Bauhaus and highlighted, on the one hand, how the school incorporated pre-modern and non-Western cultural elements. On the other hand, the exhibition also showed how this same repertoire and its indigenous peoples continued to suffer from the devastation of their territories and traditions, while the *program of modern design* continued to be spread a result of the ongoing European colonial instinct, which in a certain way deepened in the post-war period with the *International*

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Style and the teachings of Ulm (BAUHAUS IMAGINISTA, 2018).

It is important to remember that, in the first years after its founding (1919), the Bauhaus had as primary premise the understand of *design as a social project*; one of its main goals was to reform art and design teaching. Art and design were seen as agents of social change. Nevertheless, the Bauhaus heirs incorporated and were incorporated by the striking thoughts of modernity. They also affected and were affected by legal, political, ideological, religious and cultural systems that disqualified what was proper to native peoples – the then uncivilized and uneducated. In other words, despite their energetic avant-garde spirit, Bauhaus members and heirs were affected by the unfoldings of the *totalizing systems that shaped modernity*.

> "Many Bauhaus members believed that the future lay in the "universal" laws of reason, freed from the constraints of traditional culture. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, spokesperson for the Bauhaus methodology, advocated the creation of a *new code* of visual values. Herbert Bayer hoped to transcend transient cultural whims by basing his design on objective and timeless laws. Style considerations and personal expression were subordinated to the "purity" of geometry and functional requirements". (LUPTON, 2009, p.150)

In many ways, the search for "purity" and "universality" ended up creating a very static formal vocabulary and a consequent *programmed and totalizing vision* of everyday life, artifacts, and communication.

VI. The Contributions of Lina Bo Bardi

In the 1950s, the Contemporary Art Insitute (IAC) – founded by Lina Bo Bardi and Pietro Maria Bardi in the São Paulo Art Museum (MASP) brought Bauhaus credentials into its curriculum and faculty. But a few years later, noticing the need to stimulate Brazilian aesthetics, Lina paid closer attention to the innovative potential of Afro-Brazilian and indigenous cultural products. This occured mainly after the architect started teaching at the School of Fine Arts at the Federal University of Bahia and also started directing the Museum of Modern Art of Bahia (MAM-BA) in Salvador. During this period, she also atempted to open a design school that, if implemented, would have greatly differentiated itself from IAC, ESDI, the Industrial Design School at FAU-USP and Belo Horizonte's School of Fine Arts.[2]

The school of industrial design envisioned by Lina would have had *pre-craft* and *popular art* as reference points. It would be closely connected to an also envisioned Museum of Popular Art – MAP. Although neither MAP nor the industrial design school were created, their intended purpose is extremely important for *understanding the past and current development of Brazilian design*. Lina imagined MAP as a "Museum for the 'Arts', that is, a place made of 'doings', of 'facts', of 'everyday events'. With its exhibitions and workshops, MAP's objective was to rescue and enhance popular culture of the Brazilian Northeast. Lina's proposal aimed to find in local culture the strength of design as "as inheritance and continuity" (ARNELLI, 2015).

Unlike the industrial design schools that were founded in the 1960s and that helped to characterize the "beginning" of design in Brazil, Lina Bo Bardi's efforts sought to establish, in Salvador, a school that would develop and improve design connected to traditional knowledge.

It is important to emphasize that Lina's project did not exclude industry; nor did it only consider local tradition. What she suggested was a transformation of tradition, framing tradition as an important heritage for the construction of a bright future for art and design. In other words, Lina wanted to maintain *project approach* towards teaching design, while design in big cities gradually surrendered to a *programmatic method*.

For Lina, traditional and popular design were part of an evolutionary process brought about by industrialization. She emphasized the Idea that progress would have had as its starting point in the original cultural roots of Brazil. That is very different from what actually happened: a development process that excluded these same cultural roots. Looking carefully at and incorporating the cultural bases of a country in design does not necessarily mean conserving forms and materials; it means evaluating original creative possibilities and evolving from them. Through this path, modern materials and modern production systems would later take the place of more primitive means, conserving, not the forms, but the deep structure of those cultural possibilities (LIMA, 2021, p. 221).

It is interesting to notice that Lina classified the production of popular artifacts in the Brazilian Northeast as a "pre-craft", since it is mainly an inheritance of craft activities, and not a form of social organization or a means of production/economic configuration, as it happened in Europe. The Brazilian handcraft noted by Lina Bo Bardi in the Brazilian Northeasst is characterized by isolated and occasional groups, mainly organized around a family structure, that would eventualy disappear (as it happened in the Southeast region of Brazil, for example), as soon as there was a minimum of economic development in the region (PERROTA-BOSCH, 2021).

VII. Conclusion

As designers and creative professionals question in recent years the originis and development of Brazilian design, suggesting that a decolonial approach,

[2] LINA BO BARDI, Salvador - http://revista5.arquitetonica.com/index.php/magazine-1/arquitetura/escada-de-lina-bo

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that is, an alternative look to the modernizing thrust could reveal significant contributions to the understanding of the role played by material culture, a few learned points become imperative in this process.

The first point is realizing the enormous difference between *design as project* from *design as program*, and understanding that the second approach played a significant part in discarding the importance of social artifacts, popular and "unerudite" knowledge, not only in Brazil, but in most colonized regions of the globe. This affected not only design, but other creative, political, and scientific conceptions. Only recently have these forgotten tradicional beliefs been slowly incorporated in a various social activities and lifestyles. But these are incipient initiatives. There is still a long way to go.

The second point crucial to design history is recognizing the fact that innovative minds from time to time saw the importance of traditional and popular culture for the development of different areas of knowledge. One of these inspirational minds (among several), was architect Lina Bo Bardi.

Lina's contribution to architecture, design and the arts in Brazil is enormous. But for the discussion presented in this article, perhaps her greatest achievement was to plan the Museum of Popular Art and the school of industrial design. Despite Brazil experiencing an industrialization impulse in the 1960s, the political context was troubled, mainly due to the establishment of the civil-military dictatorship. These ingredients contributed to the fact that MAP and the school of industrial design envisioned by Lina were never actually established.

Today, however, one can understand the importance of Lina's plan. Faced with an inevitable process of technological evolution and industrialization, the Museum of Popular Art (MAP)and the school of industrial design would establish an alliance between the modernization of society and its cultural identity. If implemented, they would very likely eliminate (in Lina's words) the project-execution *fracture* in the field of industrial design, "aiming to eliminate the anonymous and demeaning nature of manual work, compared to the excessive intellectualism stripped of any direct connection with lifestyle practice." It would certainly also contribute to lessening the predominance of the project over the program.

In recent years, there has been great discussion about the role, the responsibility and contribution of tradicional and popular culture in various Brazilian creative, scientific and technological professional activities. This discussion is especially important in places lacking original, low-budget and concrete solutions for so many economic and life-challenging problems. Design has an important part to play in creating fairer and more sustainable forms of production. A decolonial approach to design has an even greater offering. One just has to understand it in its depths, so that socioeconomic and political practices can actually propose significant changes in society.

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