

Contemporary Brazilian Architecture: Principles in Question

By Renato Leão Rego*

Brazilian architecture in the twentieth century was fundamentally shaped by modernist ideals, producing an impactful national image. However, its recent evolution reveals a significant shift in its underlying principles and strategies. This paper examines the recent architectural production in Brazil, focusing on how design strategies have adapted to changing cultural and contextual demands. Through a multiple case study and historical-interpretative approach, the analysis demonstrates that contemporary Brazilian architecture no longer adheres to a singular, cohesive stylistic identity. Instead, it is characterized by fragmentation and diversity. This plurality is evident in the use of varied materials, construction technologies, and formal expressions, reflecting the country's cultural heterogeneity. The paper states that current architectural practice prioritizes historically and geographically situated solutions, responding directly to the specific needs and contexts of each project. Consequently, variables such as the physical environment and the social milieu have become central to the design process, taking precedence over the abstract and idealized forms, typical of the modernist era.

Introduction

Up until the late twentieth century, Brazilian architecture was primarily defined by modernist values and aesthetics. Initially, tropical modernism emerged through the ‘Carioca school’ in Rio de Janeiro, followed by the formalist brutalism of the ‘Paulista school’ in São Paulo. Throughout the century, Brazilian modernist architecture – endorsed by both authoritarian and democratic regimes aiming to promote national progress and development – gained international recognition for its character – relatively unified and distinctive. However, in the twenty-first century this coherence has clearly dissipated with the emergence of a more pluralist architectural landscape, reflecting the complexity of Brazil itself.¹

This paper explores this new panorama, in which the architectural practice has abandoned the pursuit of the stylistic uniformity and singular national identity of the previous century in favour of a more direct and context-responsive approach. Drawing upon a historical-interpretative strategy and employing multiple case studies,² the paper analyses iconic buildings selected from different regions of the country; these prize-awarded buildings have been recognised by critics and crafted by prominent architects. The majority of these works result from collaborative practices, reflecting a shift away from individualised authorship, which dominated

*Professor, State University of Maringá, Brazil.

1. R. A. Paiva and B. M. Braga (Eds.), *Arquiteturas Contemporâneas: Fronteiras Híbridias* (Fortaleza: Expressão Gráfica e Editora, 2025); R. L. Rego, *A Beleza da Arquitetura Contemporânea* (Rio de Janeiro: Riobooks, 2025).

2. L. N. Groat and D. Wang, *Architectural Research Methods* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2013).

the last century architectural production in Brazil. By investigating this selection of recent buildings, the paper infers their core architectural principles, design strategies, and methodologies.

First, a historical background sets the context and the primary characteristics of twentieth-century Brazilian architecture. Then, taking the buildings as material evidence, the paper identifies the key variable in the architectural process, namely physical environment, social milieu, accommodation of activities, cultural symbolism, and form. The following analysis unveils the abandonment of the unified imagery of the modernist period and the promotion of context-driven approaches rooted in historical and geographical specificity. Thus, it is shown that the architectural expression of the previous century has given way to more adaptive and relational forms. This change has produced a pluralistic architectural landscape characterized by diverse materials, construction methods, and formal languages. As a result, the papers stresses that factors such as the physical environment and the social milieu now take precedence over the abstract, idealised forms once conceived *a priori* during the modernist period. A delayed, yet significant influence of postmodern thought, particularly in relation to tradition, material culture, and local identity is acknowledged.

Brazilian (and) Modernist Architecture

The twentieth-century Brazilian architecture gained significant international recognition due to its striking and expressive character.³ Much of that production was shaped by an exploration of form and guided by modernist design principles. (Needless to say, its overestimated sculptural role of architectural forms was criticized by foreign rationalist architects).

The so-called ‘new architecture’ emerged in Europe in the early decades of the twentieth century, and rapidly spread across the globe, assuming distinct characteristics in regions such as Finland, Japan, Mexico, and Brazil.⁴ Globally, distinct forms of modernism arose from local adaptations, for modernization, perceived as a universal aspiration, was reinterpreted within cultural context.⁵ In Brazil, architects influenced by Le Corbusier transformed purist principles into a uniquely sensory, native expression, whose vibrant plasticity evoked the baroque tradition of eighteenth-century Brazil.⁶ Lucio Costa, an architect, professor, historian, and theorist – also a civil servant at the Ministry of Culture – endeavoured to integrate the ‘new architecture’ into Brazil by

3. P. Goodwin, *Brazil Builds* (New York: MoMA, 1943); H. E. Mindlin, *Arquitetura Moderna no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Aeroplano, 1999); Y. Bruand, *Arquitetura Contemporânea no Brasil* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1991); B. Bergdoll, E. Comas, J. F. Liernur, and P. del Real, *Latin America in Construction: Architecture since 1955–1980* (New York: MoMA, 2015).

4. J. M. Montaner, *Después del Movimiento Moderno* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1995).

5. P. Healey and Upton, *Crossing Borders: International Exchange and Planning Practices* (London: Routledge, 2010).

6. K. Frampton, *Historia Crítica de la Arquitectura Moderna* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1994), 258.

linking modernist innovations to the evolution of humble colonial constructions.⁷ Unlike the European modernism, which was universal, borderless, and detached from the past and historicist styles, Brazil's architectural expression was simultaneously modernist, colonial, nationalist, and distinctly Brazilian.

The tropical architecture of the 'Carioca school' was closely associated with the state-led modernisation under president Getúlio Vargas' administration (1930–1954), which aimed to build a modern, industrial, and urban society.⁸ During the dictatorial period named *Estado Novo* (New State, 1937–1945), the modernist architecture became an instrument of national identity and progress.⁹ Iconic examples include the Brazilian Pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair, The Ministry of Education and Health in Rio de Janeiro (1936) and works featured in the Brazil Builds exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) in 1943. While European avant-garde movements sought to dissolve identities and break with tradition, the Brazilian modernism, favoured by the State, highlighted local distinctiveness. Modernity, tradition, and nation-building discourse were closely interwoven to reinterpret the past and shape a meaningful image for modern Brazil.¹⁰

In the late 1950s, the construction of Brasília was (again) part of an ambitious governmental plan to rapidly advance Brazil's development (progressing 50 years in 5). This time, though, it signalled an internationalist nationalism, detached from local or past links – a less regionally grounded architectural approach. The modernist design of the new federal capital introduced a radically distinct urban form, less rooted in tradition and aligned with the universal ideal of a rationalist and functionalist city, fundamentally altering and redefining urban life.¹¹

The brutalist architecture of the 'Paulista school', characterized by the universal use of *béton brut*, gained momentum with the Action Plan implemented by the São Paulo state government in the early 1960s. Its architectural expression defined by exposed reinforced concrete and emphasis on shade, formalism, and structural

7. L. Costa, "Documentação necessária (1938)," in *Registro de uma Vivência* (São Paulo: Empresa das Artes, 1995). Each historian presents modern architecture and tries to design the architecture of the present, as discussed by M. De la Vega de León, "The historiography of modern architecture: twenty-five years later," *Athens Journal of Architecture* 1, no. 2 (2015): 97-110.

8. V. Rezende (Ed.), *Urbanismo na Era Vargas* (Rio de Janeiro: UFF, 2012); A. de C. Gomes (Ed.), *Olhando para Dentro: 1930–1964* (Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva, 2013).

9. Identity in architecture can be noticed through three aspects: formal, stylistic/linguistic, and technology and materials used for its construction. See: L. Kumaraku and P. Dasara. "Identity of architecture: the case of the National Library of Kosovo," *Athens Journal of Architecture* 9, no. 3 (2023): 281-298.

10. Costa, *Registro de uma Vivência*, 1995; L. Cavalcanti, "Le Corbusier, o Estado Novo e a formação da arquitetura moderna brasileira," in *Textos Fundamentais da História da Arquitetura Moderna Brasileira* (ed.) A. Guerra (São Paulo: Romano Guerra, 2010); C. A. F. Martins, "Identidade nacional e Estado no projeto modernista: modernidade, Estado e tradição," in *Textos Fundamentais da História da Arquitetura Moderna Brasileira* (ed.) A. Guerra (São Paulo: Romano Guerra, 2010); C. E. D. Comas, "Arquitetura moderna, estilo Corbu, pavilhão brasileiro," in *Textos Fundamentais da História da Arquitetura Moderna Brasileira* (ed.) A. Guerra (São Paulo: Romano Guerra, 2010); F. Lara, *Excepcionalidade do Modernismo Brasileiro* (São Paulo: Romano Guerra, 2018); J. L. Cohen, *O Futuro da Arquitetura Desde 1889* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2013); H. Segawa, *Arquiteturas no Brasil 1900–1990* (São Paulo: EDUSP, 1997).

11. J. Holston, *Cidade Modernista* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1993).

eloquence¹² produced a new modern image, once again linked to narratives of national identity and nation-building discourse, as seen in the Brazilian Pavilion at Expo'70 in Osaka. The *Paulista* architecture, although associated with left-wing sociopolitical ideals, dominated the national architectural production in the years after Brasília, during another dictatorship (1964–1985). The military regime then adopted a development model focused on territorial expansion, national integration, and infrastructure. Under the slogan *Brasil Grande* [Greater Brazil], government efforts to transform the physical landscape spurred economic growth and regional development. The early 1970s, known as the period of the 'economic miracle' (for its high GDP) saw major projects – such as the Transamazonian highway, the Rio-Niterói bridge, and the Itaipu dam – become symbols of progress, rekindling some of the optimism of Brasília's era.

Despite their powerful and 'nationalized' forms, the *Carioca* and *Paulista* architectural designs were shaped by universalist, simplifying, and homogenizing ideals – hallmarks of the reasoning and aesthetics of the machine age. For the most part, modernist architecture excluded external influences such as sociocultural factors, local customs, conventional building techniques, and traditional materials. Instead, it favoured abstract solutions that distanced themselves from reality, lacking a "satisfactory reference to the world of things."¹³

Late Postmodernist Resonance

Brazil's insular status during the military dictatorship, combined with its developmentalist agenda during the years of the 'economic miracle', helped consolidate modernist brutalism as a symbol of progress, of a 'country of the future.' During the re-democratization period in the second half of the 1980s, postmodernism received limited attention and was generally approached through a sociological lens, framed as a critique of the U.S. capitalism and the consumer society it produced.

The narrow understanding of postmodernism also helps explain the Brazilian disregard for – and limited local debate on – its relevance to the late twentieth-century architectural design. Postmodernist ideas were often dismissed as frivolous and revivalist, and earlier shifts in design thinking that predated the term 'postmodernism,' such as the work of Ernesto Nathan Rogers, Aldo Rossi, Saverio Muratori, and even Team 10 were overlooked. The delayed translations of key theoretical texts – more specifically those by Rossi and Robert Venturi – further limited their influence. In Brazil, postmodernism was broadly discredited as superficial. Lina Bo Bardi's projects in Bahia or Severiano Porto's in the Amazon were labelled 'regionalist' and, thus, less legitimate within the dominant modernist discourse. Urban and architectural projects in Curitiba in the mid-1960s and the following decade neither corresponded to the expected image of a 'country of the future,' because they drew on vernacular aspects and conventional materials – invoking history (historicism) and place (regionalism). Unlike the modernist rationality, Curitiba's projects articulated

12. M. A. J. Bastos and R. V. Zein, *Brasil: Arquiteturas Após 1950* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2010).

13. C. Norberg-Schulz, "La arquitectura inteligible: hacia una nueva figuración," *Arquitectura Viva*, no. 2 (1988): 6-9.

contextualism and environmentalism: they valued traditions and cultural difference, reinforced a sense of place, returned to the conventional street, and thereby aligned more closely with citizens' everyday practices rather than seeking to transform them. Even so, disdain for postmodernist architecture persisted, visible in the frequent mockery of what some called 'fashion architecture.' In this spirit, architect and Curitiba mayor Jaime Lerner joked that what truly took hold in his city was not the 'postmodern', but the 'modern post,' referring to the concrete lamppost that replaced wooden ones, which were recycled and reused in new buildings in the recently-planned city parks – a clear postmodernist gesture.¹⁴

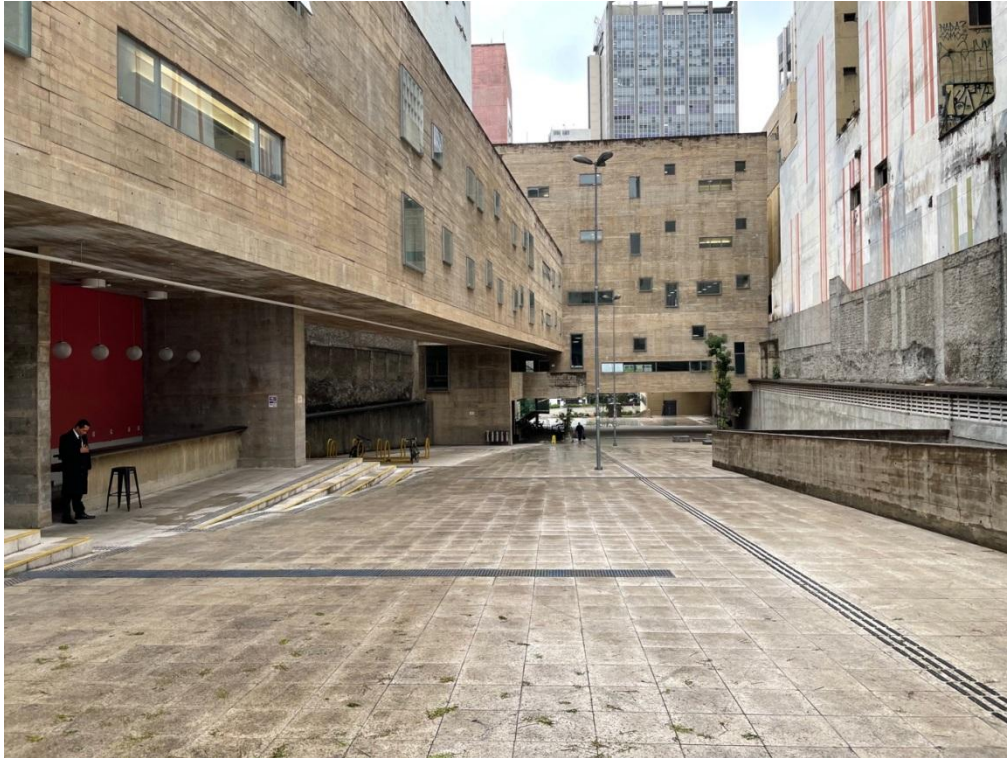


Figure 1. *Praça das Artes, Brasil Arquitetura, 2006-2012*

Source: the author.

In general, a broader understanding of postmodernist thought has revealed the emergence of a “new sensibility” operating since the 1950s within tensions between tradition and innovation, conservation and renewal, mass culture and high culture – tensions in which rigid dichotomies gradually lost relevance.¹⁵ This sensibility redirected architectural design away from the idealized forms, the radically transformative proposals and universal solutions, towards the particular, understood as creative stimulus, sustainability device, and design strategy. Moreover, from the late twentieth century onwards, increasing global exchange fostered the circulation of ideas, people, and goods; foreign architects worked more frequently in Brazil and

14. R. L. Rego, I. C. Januário, and R. A. Avanci, “Lerner, Friedman, and Candilis-Josic-Woods: transatlantic ideas and design affinities,” *Cadernos ProArq* 35 (2020): 228.

15. A. Huyssen, “Mapping the postmodern,” *New German Critique*, no. 33 (1984): 5-52.

collaborative, co-authored practice became more common. As a result, contemporary Brazilian architecture became less cohesive and more diverse, more particular and situation specific.

Since postmodernism is understood as a historical condition (rather than a style), its nuances, diversity, and influences become clearer.¹⁶ Such a view expands the term beyond the idea of an exaggerated, decorative, or banal idiom. It enables a renewed focus on locality, ecology, cultural identity, and historical continuity, contributing significantly to contemporary architectural thinking in Brazil.



Figure 2. *Fasano Las Piedras, Isay Weinfeld, 2008*

Source: the author.

A former director of MoMA, Arthur Drexler, observed that the modernist architecture expected architectural pleasure to arise from direct engagement with necessity. According to Drexler, the pioneers of modernism answered to the question ‘what to build’ with ‘how to build;’ and the architectural fictions and the ‘unnecessary’ play of form were rejected as unworthy. Yet modernist forms were justified through deterministic doctrines that those very forms often contradicted, and the virtues of austerity promoted by rationalism lost force amid heterogeneous attempts to escape the constraints of functionalism. From the 1960s onward, what

16. Huyssen, “Mapping the postmodern,” 1984; A. Colquhoun, “Pós-modernismo e estruturalismo,” in A. Colquhoun, *Modernidade e Tradição Clássica* (São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 2004); T. Farrell and A. N. Furman, *Revisiting postmodernism* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: RIBA, 2017); S. Giamarelos, *Resisting Postmodern Architecture: Critical Regionalism Before Globalisation* (London: UCL Press, 2022); H. W. Kruft, *A History of Architectural Theory from Vitruvius to the Present* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994), 446.

to build and how to build again became distinct questions, and contradictions were justified in the name of variety – or by the stated aim of finding, for each problem, a genuine, singular, and appropriate solution.¹⁷

In the 1960s, architectural thinking was more sharply marked by rejection of the unifying concepts of an exhausted modernism and by critique of the rationalism that seemed to exclude creativity. This was never a rejection of modernization or of the desire for modernity; rather, it signalled insubordination toward modernism's indifference to popular culture, new media, symbolic dimensions, codes, and regional traditions. Ecological and environmental concerns further reinforced the critique of modernity and modernization.¹⁸ Even so, the architectural culture in the 1960s retained a sense of future and of new frontiers, sharing the technological optimism of the early-twentieth-century European avant-gardes.

During the 1970s, architectural thinking increasingly relied on uncritical “practices all working out of the ruins of the modernist edifice, raiding it for ideas, plundering its vocabulary and supplementing it with randomly chosen images and motifs from pre-modern and non-modern cultures as well as from contemporary mass culture.”¹⁹ The ‘postmodernist mood’ was one among several revisionist tendencies that became evident; and they all pursued aesthetic and symbolic enrichment.²⁰

With the more strident and extremist postmodernist proclamations now tempered, it becomes necessary to recognize their legacy: new expressive and locally pertinent arrangements, and the contribution of specific situations and traditional contexts to innovative contemporary configurations. This has yielded a renewed sensitivity to place, ecology, cultures, local building traditions, and the history of architecture itself.²¹ According to what Ockman noticed elsewhere,²² in Brazil I notice a revival of pre-modernist and anti-modernist themes and a reconciliation of functionalism with more humanistic concerns, apart from the re-evaluation of the radical or critical side of modernism. In the twentieth-first-century Brazil, attention to the social milieu and local particularities; the renewed use of traditional techniques and materials; the reincorporation of ornament; the recognition of characteristic building types; references to historical configurations; interest in conservation and preservation; and ecological thinking materialize the resonance of postmodernist positions in contemporary architectural design, as the examples that follow will show.

Architectural Design in Brazil, Today

Decision-making is not purely rational in the process of architectural creation. Emotions play a significant role through intuition – a mechanism shaped by

17. A. Drexler, *Transformaciones en la Arquitectura Moderna* (Barcelona: GG, 1982).

18. I. McHarg, *Design with Nature* (New York: The Natural History Press, 1969).

19. Huyssen, “Mapping the postmodern,” 1984, 25.

20. W. Jr. Curtis, *La Arquitectura Moderna desde 1900* (Madrid: Hermann Blume, 1986), 376-377.

21. B. Santa Cecília, and C. A. Maciel, “Ainda pós-modernos?” in *Arquiteturas Contemporâneas* (orgs.) M. M. Valença, and R. A. Paiva (Natal: EdUFRN, 2024), 74.

22. J. Ockman, *Architecture Culture 1943-1968* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993).

experience and affective responses, demonstrating the influence of the body on the mind. Consequently, key references for architectural design often originate beyond the disciplinary boundaries of architecture itself,²³ materializing the connection to the ‘world of things.’

A sort of reverse design process²⁴ allows the reconstruction of design decisions and reveals underlying dilemmas. A clearer understanding of the design strategies shaping contemporary Brazilian architecture can be achieved by recognizing the design variable prioritised by designers.²⁵ In practice, architects tend to privilege one of five key variables that command their design process:

1. Physical environment: geographic and environmental conditions.
2. Social milieu: collective identity, psychological dimensions, sociocultural and economic context.
3. Cultural symbolism: values, beliefs, moral codes, and ideological meanings.
4. Accommodation of activities: spatial organisation and functionality.
5. Form and artistic dimension: degree of formal autonomy.

The design of the Square of Arts (*Praça das Artes*, 2006-2012, Figure 1), by *Brasil Arquitetura*, responds to a challenging urban context in São Paulo city centre. Its idiosyncratic configuration emerges from the surrounding negative spatiality, a chaotic and degraded environment. The project abandons the unified volumetry of modernism in favour of a relational and accommodative strategy, among the existing buildings, in order to generate public space in the middle of the block. Thus, the building lacks monumentality and formal integrity. The fenestration in the pigmented concrete volumes deliberately rejects standardisation and regularity; variations in the size, shape, and placement of openings confer an additional ornamental quality.

In the design for the Fasano The Rocks Hotel (*Fasano Las Piedras*, 2008, Figure 2), the architect Isay Weinfeld explored the analogy between existing stones and scattered ‘artificial-stone’ volumes in a design strongly conditioned by the physical environment and closely aligned with the Uruguayan landscape – an strategy that reminds of Rafael Moneo’s proposal for the Kursaal. Either a tower or a slab would have blocked the view from the valley, which suggested the architect the option for isolated, dispersed bungalows. Concrete prisms rest on stone plinths without mortar joints, adapting to the terrain’s slope. By fragmenting the building, the landscape remained integral. The absence of visible windows, roofs, or rooftop equipment reinforces the building’s abstract character. Alike the *Praça das Artes* design, this is another exemplary case in which the variable ‘physical environment’ prevails and foster the design creativity.

Likewise, *Lins Arquitetos* adopted an environmental strategy to ensure the necessary thermal comfort for the School-Gym (*Academia Escola*, 2018) located in

23. R. M. R. Alves, “Experiencing, knowing, and building architecture,” *Athens Journal of Architecture* 5, no. 3 (2019): 283-300.

24. A. Simitch and V. Warke, *The Language of Architecture* (Gloucester, Mass.: Rockport Publishers, 2014).

25. J. P. Aschner-Rosselli, “¿Cómo concebir un proyecto arquitectónico?” *Dearquitectura* 9, no. 5 (2009): 30-41.

Brazil's semi-arid region. The architects adopted circular volumes that function as sectorised units. Their uniform façades are composed of three layers: an outer perforated screen of locally produced ceramic bricks that filters light; an intermediate vegetated layer adapted to regional conditions; and an inner layer of pivoting glass frames. This strategy guaranteed constant ventilation inside and minimized the direct incidence of solar rays. The use of conventional materials and techniques results in an economical construction in which formal expression is clearly subordinated to environmental and social imperatives.



Figure 3. *Pina Contemporânea, Arquitetos Associados, 2018-2023*

Source: the author.

Also drawn upon the physical environment as the prevalent design variable, the São Paulo Contemporary Pinacotheca building (*Pina Contemporânea*, 2018-2023, Figure 3) resulted from the intention of establishing a strong relationship with its surroundings through its integration with the adjacent park, the incorporation of heritage-listed structures and the connection with two tube stations. *Arquitetos Associados* proposed a covered plaza that reinterprets spatial configurations typical of *Paulista* brutalism, while the wooden pergola references the natural environment. Its irregular form draws on Sverre Fehn's Nordic Pavilion. The structure covering the plaza unifies the architectural ensemble and links the pre-existent buildings. This connection is endorsed by the mezzanine, where the cafeteria opens views to the park and the plaza, while the main gallery is partially underground.

Context – more specifically the social milieu – was the dominant variable in the Children's Residences project (*Moradas Infantis de Canuanã*, 2015-2017, Figure 4). Located in a deprived inland region of the Legal Amazon, this awarded design

stands out for its social engagement. Local practices, traditions, and resources and the lack of them informed the design, generating awareness of *caboclo* and *indigenous* cultures. Architects from *Rosenbaum + Aleph Zero* studios had an immersive experience in the area to develop a singular proposal for the boarding school with more than five hundred students. The design prioritised shaded communal spaces, responding to intense heat and fostering social interaction. Traditional elements such as roofs and eaves address climatic conditions – frequent downpours-, while the combination of glued laminated timber and soil-cement bricks reconciled regional practices with the constraints of local construction systems. Bricks were locally produced while laminated timber was developed elsewhere. Indigenous motives ornament the brick walls to make the building familiar.



Figure 4. *Moradas Infantis de Canuanã*, Rosenbaum + Aleph Zero, 2015-2017

Source: the author.



Figure 5. *MAR, Bernardes + Jacobsen Arquitetura, 2013*

Source: the author.

The architecture of Museum of Art of Rio [de Janeiro], whose acronym MAR means ‘sea’ ([MAR](#), 2013, Figure 5) unifies three pre-existing buildings of different periods and styles under an undulating canopy, metaphorically evoking the sea. This device provides not only formal integration but also a symbolic identity. (Thus, cultural symbolism can be taken as the dominant variable in this design) The structure was produced with expanded polystyrene moulds, based on a full-scale topographic model of the imagined surface, handcrafted by artisans from *samba* schools, responsible for Carnival costumes. Inspired by the physical environment, the studio *Bernardes + Jacobsen Arquitetura* developed this surprising low-tech structure with strong social engagement.

The project for the *Emiliano Hotel* ([Hotel Emiliano](#), 2013-2017, Figure 6), located along Copacabana’s waterfront, addressed contrasting conditions including necessity of privacy, extreme exposure, and intense public activity nearby. The façade proposed by *Studio Arthur Casas + Chad Oppenheim Architecture* reinterpreted the traditional *mashrabiya*, mediating climate, ventilation, and privacy. Fabricated from white fibreglass, the retractable elements incorporated ornamental patterns inspired by the work of the Brazilian landscape designer Roberto Burle Marx, itself rooted in modernist principles. The revival of the Moresque element – part of the Portuguese legacy in Brazil – is not only a climate moderator but also a visual barrier to the interior, allowing the insider to observe outside activities without being seen. So context – both physical environment and social milieu – was determinant to the creative design solution.



Figure 6. *Hotel Emiliano, Studio Arthur Casas + Chad Oppenheim Architecture, 2013-2017*

Source: the author.

The São Paulo headquarters of the Moreira Salles Institute (*Instituto Moreira Salles (IMS)*, 2011-2017, Figure 7) occupies a narrow site, imposing vertical organisation and rapid steel construction. The design creates a skin-and-bone tower with distinct functional zones – exhibition spaces and media facilities – arranged behind a translucent façade. Non-standardised floor layouts introduce a deliberate divergence between internal organisation and external form. Indeed, program, i.e. the accommodation of activities, and physical environment drove the design approach of *Andrade Morettin Arquitetos*. Activities received specific configurations, following a gradient from the most accessible on the ground floor to the most restrict at the top of the building, which reminds of Rem Koolhaas' free section.



Figure 7. *IMS, Andrade Morettin Arquitetos, 2011-2017*

Source: the author.

The mixed-use building designed by *Triptyque* in São Paulo (*Edifício Harmonia*, 2007-2008, Figure 8) organises functions into two separated volumes along a narrow plot, connected by circulation systems. A transparent façade is protected by a movable, rustic, wood brise-soleil, while the vegetated lateral wall and exposed installations reject the notion of a finished building. The project's materiality integrates functional and aesthetic considerations. Form, as a monoblock or regular volume, was dismissed as design departing point. Thus, the conformation of the

building did not follow a process of mass removal; it resulted from the addition of the items determined by the programme. Accommodation of activities was the main drive. Contextual aspects – physical environment or social milieu – did not inform the architectural expression like the organization of the activities did: the watering of the plants, the brise opening system, the capturing of rainwater and the circulation created a sort of tropical low tech. The use of varied materials, colours and textures reminds of OMA's aesthetics.

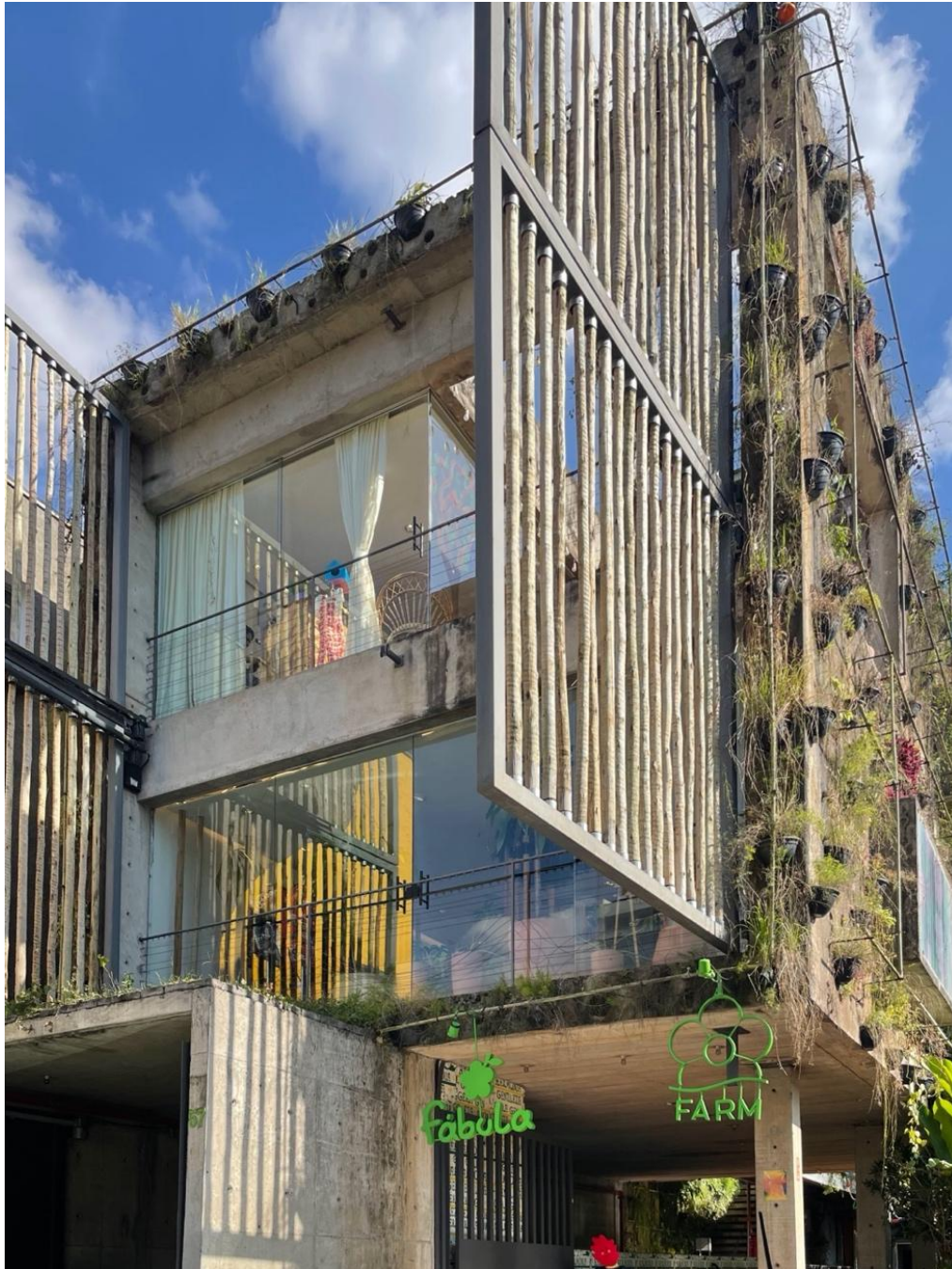


Figure 8. *Edifício Harmonia, Triptyque, 2007-2008*

Source: the author.

The Church of the Sacred Family in Brasília (*Igreja da Sagrada Família*, 2017-2022, Figure 9) draws explicitly on modernist architectural language. By articulating volumes such as bars, towers, cylinders, and exposed concrete prisms, the project codesigned by *ArqBr* and Luciana Saboia establishes a cohesive ensemble. Simplified forms, reduced compositional elements, controlled natural lighting, and an austere interior reinforce a minimalist aesthetic aligned with Brasília's monumental character, scale and building types. The programme was treated separately, resulting in four different volumes added to, and hiding, an existing construction. The formal organization of the building ensemble, rather common in Oscar Niemeyer's works, gave place to the churchyard and neutralized undesired external visual interferences. Cultural symbolism is balanced with the other variables. The simplification of the volumes, the reduction of compositive and building elements, the absence of ornaments, the treatment of natural light and the austere interior appearance strengthen the minimalist aesthetics and spirituality. Form could be pointed as the main variable in this design strategy. However, it is important to bear in mind its place – Brasília – and the building typology that has characterized the city's monumental buildings.

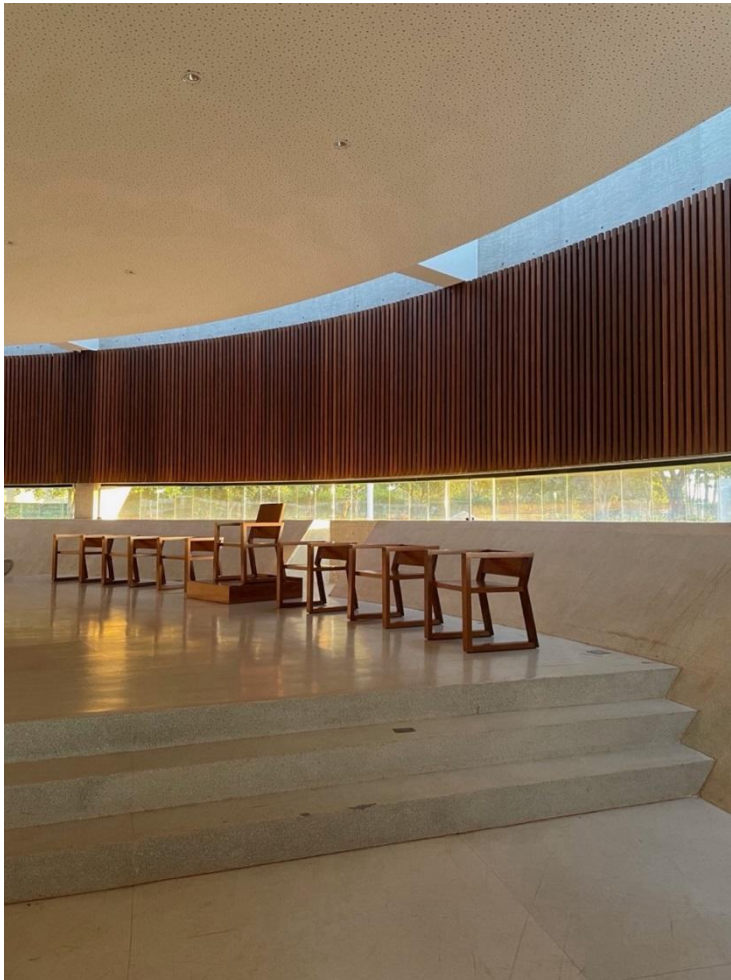


Figure 9. *Igreja da Sagrada Família*, *ArqBr* and *Luciana Saboia*, 2017-2022 Source: the author.

When it comes to form as a design-driver, the pavilion built by *Studiomk27* for the design store *Mi Casa*, in São Paulo (*Mi Casa Vol. B*, 2006-2007, Figure 10), stands out as a regular single volume, largely indifferent to site boundaries. The architect's reference was the materiality of the *Paulista* brutalist architecture, turned into an artistic motif. Exploring the plasticity of the building material, the project potentialized the appearance of the *béton brut*. The overall volume – a plain regular prism – was adopted due to the artistic intentions regarding the building material previously selected. While the brutalist architecture left visible the texture of the wooden moulds, constructed with new timber panels and precision, in this building timber was reused and displayed randomly, chaotically. Some wooden parts even remained. The final appearance is extremely rustic and highly imaginative. Form was solely the main driver of this design strategy.

Finally, the extension of the Museum of Art of São Paulo originally designed by the architect Lina Bo Bardi in 1960s consists of a regular vertical prism clad in dark metal mesh. Although the new *MASP* (2024) contrasts with the materiality and the horizontality of the original brutalist building, it maintains proportional resonance. The neutral envelope designed by *Metro Arquitetos* regulates light and temperature while preserving the prominence of the iconic structure. The emphasis on formal reduction and visual restraint deliberately and respectfully guided the design.



Figure 10. *Mi Casa Vol. B*, *Studiomk27*, 2006-2007

Source: the author.

As these examples show, contemporary Brazilian architecture has no longer been defined by the modernist paradigm. Rather, it has reflected context-sensitive approaches grounded in place, materials, environment, and social conditions. This shift has marked a transition from formal speculation to responsive construction, and from a unified national expression to a pluralistic production that reflects diverse cultural and territorial realities.

Accommodative strategies frequently generate fragmented volumes and formal deformations that respond directly to site conditions, rejecting idealised, abstract forms. Analogy, reference, and visual association establish contextual links and support formal originality. Strong contextual engagement promotes identity and, to some extent, a sense of belonging, reinforcing architecture's cultural dimension. Buildings thus move beyond autonomous objects to become narratives – relational constructs shaped in dialogue with their surroundings. However, this orientation also entails a loss of stylistic unity and cohesion.

Conclusion

In a context of intensified global exchange, architects have developed singular solutions by strategically emphasising specific design variables. This approach has weakened homogenising tendencies and encouraged architectures that integrate ecological thinking, environmental responsibility, cultural embeddedness, and diversity – aspects stemmed from postmodern sensibilities.

The national (and nationalist) characteristics that once defined Brazilian modernist architecture can now be understood as stylistic constructions of a past era. The contemporary works examined here demonstrate a more grounded sense of belonging, expressed through responsive, relational, heterogenous configurations.

Understanding the characteristics of the architecture recently produced in Brazil offers a valuable contribution to both academic scholarship and professional practice. As this paper has shown, architectural historiography has yet to fully acknowledge the positive contributions of postmodern ideas to architectural thought. Moreover, the design approaches observed in the case studies suggest a need to reconsider how architecture is taught. They challenge current pedagogical models that still rely heavily on crystallized formal prescriptions and supposedly universal design solutions. This shift also encourages designers to become more attentive to specific circumstances and to think strategically. The need to specify demands greater creativity from architects, enabling them to respond more effectively to environmental and ecological responsibilities, Brazil's social diversity, and the demands of cultural insertion.

As W. Jr. Curtis has suggested, the invention of new forms is inspired and enriched by the understanding and transformation of past ones – yet at a level that transcends the superficial trappings of style.²⁶

26. W. Jr. Curtis, "William JR Curtis on architectural education," *The Architectural Review* (2012).

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