

Drift and diversions. Experiences, journeys, morphologies



Flávio de Carvalho. Experiência nº 3, New Look. Traje do "Novo Homem dos Trópicos". Flávio de Carvalho con el nuevo traje de verano para hombres, 1956. Fotografía b/n.

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- PLACE:** Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía
Sabatini, 3A
- ORGANISED BY:** Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía
- CURATED BY:** Lisette Lagnado
María Berríos
- COORDINATED BY:** Nur Banzi and Carol Burnier

The different Brazilian and Chilean architectural concepts that form the subject of this exhibition share a humanist, visionary basis in their way of approaching the relationship between public space and community life, topography and urbanism. This is reflected in both the drawings, texts and architectural models by Flávio de Carvalho (1899-1973), Juan Borchers (1910-1975), Lina Bo Bardi (1914-1992), Roberto Matta (1911-2002), and Sergio Bernardes (1919-2002), and in the collective type of educational experience developed by the School of Valparaíso. Poet-architects, inspired by a growing impulse towards modernity, shared a belief in technology's capacity to reduce the working day and increase leisure time. Their motto was that of expanding the space for an *homo ludens* and of implementing a community-based life. In the case of Brazil, this was based on the Anthropologist principle, while in Chile it involved the assumption of a series of values relating to private life, hospitality and accessibility.

The visitor may embark on the exhibition with pre-conceived ideas, seeking out, for example, Constant's notions of "unitary urbanism" or Guy Debord and his colleagues' idea of "drift". These, however, are not to be found. Over the course of the exhibition the visitor will realise that he or she is not in Europe, where "the House of man fell down" ¹ beneath Fascist and Nazi bombs. Nor will the visitor encounter the rationalist responses that changed the course of modernism. The idea of the "drift" arises in a different manner, namely through the question, "What was the extent of rationalist prophecy in the South American countries?"

It is well known that prior to his first trip to South America, for Le Corbusier (1887-1965), using a line that was not straight meant reproducing the irregular form of a "mule track" in a medieval city. However, after the 1929 trip, Le Corbusier allowed himself to design a building-viaduct in the form of a huge wave set in a landscape of hills. It is always a worthwhile exercise to review the flow of "interjections" between a new world and old civilisations, in the manner of the judicious periodization that Sérgio Buarque de Holanda (1936) established between the Spanish and the Portuguese in order to propose the *decline of the sower* and the *rise of the floor tiler* as different phases of colonialism, domination and urbanisation.

In the meantime, we encounter more directional drifts between earth and sky, albeit with different names: *experience*, *psychological morphology*, *journey*. It was poets rather than architects or urban planners who invented fantastical names to evoke civilisations in the tropics and the Andes region. *Utopialand* is the result of Blaise Cendrars' Brazilian adventure in a continent imbued with hopes, in the trips he made in the legendary 1920s, while the *Amereida*, an *Aeneid* for the southern hemisphere, took shape in 1965 from a collective project that deliberately omitted the concept of a single author. ²

As in the case of Cendrars, other foreigners considered Brazil a "spiritual homeland" characterised by its supreme natural world and its flexible national boundaries. For Lina Bo Bardi, who emigrated to her "country of choice" in 1946, architecture was "an art that has to seriously take into account the land in

which it is practiced.”³ Her praise of the vernacular nature of modern consciousness derives from the *Manifiesto Antropófago* [Cannibal Manifesto] by Oswald de Andrade (1928). Understanding the idea of the co-existence of craft with different modes of industrial production allowed the protagonists of our drift to cast light on the issue of a “synthesis of the arts”. This concept now acts as a guide to the layout of the present exhibition.

Nonetheless, a whole range of ambiguities had arisen since that sketch by Le Corbusier anticipating the future of Rio de Janeiro (and which Sergio Bernardes would develop with the 1965 version of his vertical-barrios). A cult of admiration had grown up around the great master, but we also find occasional disagreements that would give rise to changes of direction. This was the case with the young Matta, who left Chile in 1934-35 in order to come closer to the international figurehead of Le Corbusier, but who would then renounce him in order to embrace the Surrealism celebrated in “Matemática Sensible – Arquitectura del Tiempo”. Here, the humanisation of architecture involves the eroticisation of a space that has to be soft in order to mould itself to the body and to the sensory desires of its inhabitants: a psychic, purely subjective space.

Nor was the encounter between Le Corbusier and Flávio de Carvalho in 1929 particularly stimulating, as the Brazilian’s efforts to introduce the syntax of modern architecture into São Paulo never took concrete shape. His un-built projects reinforced the stigma of “revolutionary romantic” that Le Corbusier assigned to him. Carvalho followed a path contrary to the “efficacy” of his master’s dictates. In fact, he had other paradigms in mind, primarily inspired by his reading of Freud. The 20th-century city would be an extension of the home and would be aimed at the “naked man” (the anthropophagus), liberated from the concepts of community-based life, the family and possessions. This approach also encompassed the launch of Carvalho’s *New Look* (1956), a tropical suit ideal for modern life in the tropics and a masculine forerunner of the miniskirt.

How, then, can we justify an ode to functionalist urbanism in Latin-American cities whose birth and growth was intrinsically informal. Can it be said that “drifting” has always been *our* best response? In an attempt to understand this urban imagery, Adrián Gorelik’s studies have pointed to “interruption” as a recurring sign in the symbolic representation of countries in that region.⁴ The present exhibition highlights many contaminated, unfinished, suspended or betrayed directions. On 31 July 1965, in Punta Arenas in the far south of Chile, the local press announced that: “Ten university professors embark on a geo-poetical study across Latin America.” On 10 September, before reaching Santa Cruz de la Sierra in the Amazon Basin, the expedition in question had to retreat for reasons only revealed two years later, namely that Che Guevara’s guerrilla forces were in the region, which was controlled by the US intelligence services.

For more complex reasons that do not require an explanation here, Latin America became a fertile laboratory for numerous alternatives or counter-

models. Until very recently many of these artistic manifestations have been considered late or even deceptive responses. Far from having exhausted their potential, however, they have now reappeared and are even overshadowing the “bad conscience” of Euro-centric narratives. Once again, it was Lina Bo Bardi who made the most generous declaration on popular culture: “Modern Brazilian architecture does not derive from colonial [architecture] but from that primitive one of the *caipira* or rural world of the peasant.”⁵ If this is the case, it is possible to grasp the cosmopolitan nature of the creative figures working far from their *South America* (in a metaphorical sense), although that distance should also be questioned in order to take into account initiatives that avoided ideological orientations in order to construct a national reality.

Until the late 1970s, architecture schools offered an alternative for realising artistic talent, offering a mixture of human sciences (philosophical and anthropological) within the context of a discipline that replaced the technical and military origins of the architect-engineer. Its way of understanding “terra firma” was as movable as the *situation* in which a word simultaneously dissolves and negotiates space. These architects had to unite *poiesis* and *praxis*, experience with landscape (contemplation) and the city (action). In other words, they politicised the terrain. Ciudad Abierta in Valparaíso reflects that same desire to encompass life in all its unexpectedness and rightness. In the present day, although now strictly within a university context, it represents the maximum expression of an *unrepeatable utopia* in the present context of a Neo-liberal system that continues to mistrust any re-thinking of its present practice of filling space through the construction and sale of buildings: a system that is currently falling apart.