

## PREFACE

### AIR LIGHT REASON TRUE

Unless I am mistaken, Stamo Papadaki was the first researcher to publish a monograph on Oscar Niemeyer's work for an international readership. This was a few years after the classic *Brazil Builds*<sup>1</sup> had revealed to the wider world the prodigies of modern Brazilian architecture. In the introduction to his *The work of Oscar Niemeyer*, the first of three books he devoted to the architect, Papadaki<sup>2</sup> echoes the consensus historiographers in Brazil had already reached regarding the factors engendering his magnificent architectural *oeuvre*:

Niemeyer's design approach was to be conditioned by the vestiges of the colonial baroque and by the climatic and physical aspects of his country. The luxuriant Baroque of Portugal, born among the austere Iberian contours, never had such an appropriate setting as in the tropical and sub-tropical backgrounds of many parts of Brazil. On the other hand, humidity and high temperatures compel a generous use of space as much as landscapes, ranging from fantastic to magnificent, make mandatory their incorporation into the architectural scheme. Thus we see in Niemeyer's buildings views carefully selected and framed, breezes trapped and channeled, spaces with their own interior horizons, providing the inhabitant with more than a minimum of "sufficient" living environment. [...] And his wandering, baroque inspired lines, becoming structural realities through the reinforced concrete frame, intermarry with the sinuous of the small alluvial valleys and the enclosing high mountains formation." (PAPADAKI, 1950: pp. i-j)

Papadaki remarks how the tropical climate and landscape, the baroque of Iberian lineage and the sinuous contours wrought from reinforced concrete combined to produce a novel unity which is the bedrock and touchstone of Niemeyer's work. His critical eye spots how certain aspects of the buildings he had designed to date imbue them with singular quality in the way they fulfill programmatic functional requirements: "Niemeyer is able to conceive and justify the empirical space that creates distances, perspectives, islands of repose, necessary for a normal intercourse of human beings under the same roof." Papadaki is sensitive enough to perceive how deftly Niemeyer handles the raw material of architecture – space. He moulds it, under diverse conditions, to secure interaction between "human beings."

In *Of glass and concrete*, Frederico de Holanda delves into space as it is figured in Niemeyer's architectures. He analyses the way internal and external space relate to each other. Rather, he offers

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1 GOODWIN, P.L. *Brazil builds: architecture new and old, 1652-1942*. (Photography by G.E. Kidder Smith) New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1943. 190p.

2 Stamo Papadaki published three monograph studies on the architect: PAPADAKI, S. *The work of Oscar Niemeyer*. New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1950, p. 220; PAPADAKI, S. *Oscar Niemeyer: works in progress*. New York: Reinhold, 1956. 192p.; PAPADAKI, S. *Oscar Niemeyer*. New York: George Braziller, 1960. 127p.

a critique of the manipulative gesture manifest in the architectural envelope. Eschewing any attempt to grapple with the grandeur and complexity of an *oeuvre* in full development, this critical account is precious because it reveals the architect's mastery in coming to terms with the prime function of architecture: forging environments for man's use and enjoyment. It also argues that some of the more recent works are less efficient in promoting a permanent, intense exchange of bodies and desires in the context of today's cities.

According to Hillier,<sup>3</sup> occupation and movement are the generic functions of architectural space. Any portion of space can be occupied for a variety of activities besides serving for the displacement of our bodies. Hence, occupation and movement are the necessary means for forging relationships between people. Sharing the same place or establishing eye contact in the same or in distinct environments are conditions mediated by the material and spatial characteristics of architecture. Shared presence and awareness are, therefore, essential socio-spatial mechanisms for framing our daily lives.

The relation between the continuous, open spaces that constitute urban space *par excellence* and the discontinuous, closed spaces that comprise buildings determines the extent to which public places afford shared presence and shared awareness. Hence, it dictates the way movement and occupation take place in our cities. Each building's envelope establishes relations of access and transparency between the two spheres (public and private) regardless of the activities they are designed for or the symbolic attributes they have been assigned. All architecture thus performs the same role, irrespective of its value – as a good or sign, in the author's own terms.

By taking this approach to Oscar Niemeyer's works, Holanda questions how much his buildings serve to characterise the urban spaces in which they are set. His desacralization or demystification, if you will, of iconic works of 20th-century architecture like the Ministry of Education & Public Health building in Rio de Janeiro (subsequently renamed the Gustavo Capanema Palace), the Pampulha complex in Belo Horizonte, the Ibirapuera Park in São Paulo, and the Cathedral in Brasilia – to name a few of the major works Holanda examines – provides the reader with an analytical framework capable of penetrating beyond the curves and volumes, the baroque inspiration and the sunny tropics.<sup>4</sup>

If the art of designing is the art of instilling order into human life, Holanda shows us how, as his

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3 HILLIER, B. *Space is the machine: a configurational theory of architecture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

4 Niemeyer himself has actually encouraged this type of critical approach: “It is not the right-angle that attracts me nor the straight, hard, unyielding line of man's creating. What attracts me is the flowing, sensual curve, the curves I encounter in my country's mountains, in the sinuous course of its rivers, in the waves of the sea, in the body of a beloved woman. Curves comprise the universe, Einstein's curved universe.” (NIEMEYER, Oscar. *Minha arquitetura: 1937-2005* [My architecture, 1937-2005]. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Revan, 2005, p. 339.)

career develops, Niemeyer creates ever more modern urban environments, progressively shutting off interior spaces and distributing doors and windows in such a way as to minimise shared presence and shared awareness in the cities that host his buildings. Niemeyer's work develops from an architecture “like building doors to open; or like framing the open,” to an architecture “where spans would open, he walled up dark to shut; where glass, concrete sheer; till man re-pent,” in the words of João Cabral de Melo Neto's concrete lament, and the consequences of this transition for the cities concerned are (and will be) significant. The effects of this closed off building, this separating of bodies, this emptying out of spaces, urban space in particular, are perceptible to yesteryear and today's urbanites in their increasingly sealed-off, separate, humdrum lives. Holanda himself has already vividly described the emergence of a particular form of modern urban design in his classic study “The negative determination of the modern movement.”<sup>5</sup> In this context, Oscar Niemeyer's work is unexceptional. Indeed, like so many others, it makes but a modest contribution – for its emergence stems from haphazard promotion of an array of individual actions – to the consolidation of a specific form of city.

At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and as the greatest Brazilian architect of last and maybe of this century has turned a hundred, the desire to inaugurate a building that bear his signature is the urge of politicians eager to put their personal stamp on the future. It similarly delights intellectuals with a fondness for tardy manifestations of our seductive modernism. It draws ordinary folks from every corner of the world, for his works are always a source of interest for the ever larger legions of tourists – for ours is an age of fleeting movement and the economy of leisure and spectacle. After all, a key ingredient in the recipe for developments designed to renew the urban landscape is the unveiling of a magnificent opus by the master of his craft.

For those itching to purchase a genuine ON-brand article, we recommend careful reading of the arguments and analyses Frederico de Holanda has to proffer. Then perhaps the next batch of commissions to alight at the emblematic penthouse on the Copacabana seafront will be attended by certain caveats: we want the urban designer architect Oscar Niemeyer who has so sagely bequeathed us buildings that foster full interaction between spaces – interiors and exteriors, be they landscapes or urban surroundings – promoting desirable friction between the beautiful bodies of the citizens of the world.

Long live the urban designer Oscar Niemeyer, “when he is more of an *architect*”!

Long live the sharp, discriminating quill of Frederico de Holanda!

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5 See HOLANDA. F. (org.) *Arquitetura & urbanidade* [Architecture & urbanity]. São Paulo: Pro Editores, 2003.

Long live our architectures and cities to “unleash reason, light and air”!

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