Multimedia

Belinda Rukschcio, director

Precise Poetry: Lina Bo Bardi’s Architecture

Bundesministerium für Unterricht und Kunst, Austria, 2014, 53 min.

The opening shot of this documentary film shows a huge crowd at an outdoor concert. The crowd spills over the plaza onto Avenida Paulista, the busy urban thoroughfare in the center of the city of São Paulo. As this image fades to black, the sound of cheering goes on for a full twenty seconds. Our imagination animates the scene until it appears again with text overlaid: “Live concert by Olodum, MASP, 1992.” It is the year Lina Bo Bardi died. The unmistakable red columns of Bo Bardi’s iconic Museum of Art of São Paulo (1957–68) frame Olodum, a Brazilian black carnival band from the city of Salvador in northeast Bahia. Bo Bardi (1914–92) renovated the building in which the Olodum organization had been established just four years earlier. “The museum used to do shows at lunchtime,” recalls Ivani di Grazia Costa, librarian at the museum, “such a big show in that space isn’t allowed anymore. The structure of the museum couldn’t bear it.” In its first minute, Belinda Rukschcio’s film lives up to the rigor and beauty of its title, Precise Poetry: Lina Bo Bardi’s Architecture.

In another sequence, a close-up of an emblematic stone fragment, a dislodged paver, depicts the nearly empty quiet plaza. Immediately, I think of the first lines of Bo Bardi’s self-published 1957 book Contribuição propedeutica ao ensino da teoria da arquitetura (Propaeutic contribution to the teaching of the theory of architecture): “There is not a single piece of stone laid down by man at the center of any of our cities, that does not express an idea, that does not represent a letter in the alphabet of our civilization.” Bo Bardi quoted this statement from the Brazilian intellectual and education reformer Manuel Araujo Porto-Alegre for two reasons, she explains in her text: first, because architects, like writers and artists, must respect the land on which their work takes place, and, second, because architecture represents civilization.

The museum is a monumental, modernist building with a rectangular glass picture gallery that seems to hover weightlessly over this plaza. Bo Bardi positioned two large central beams parallel to the street, creating a free span of 243 feet between columns. At each end of the suspended glass box, more than 70 feet above street level, two large concrete downspouts direct rainwater into two symmetrical rectangular pools located at the base of the columns (Figure 1). This is the first of the film’s many powerful visual images and sequences that elaborate on the central idea that Bo Bardi’s architecture is “precise, rigorous, and concise,” like poetry. Punctuated by testimonials from architects Marcelo Carvalho Ferraz, Marcelo Suzuki, and André Vainer, who worked with Bo Bardi in the 1980s, clients like the radical theater producer José “Zé” Celso Martinez Correa, director of the Teatro Oficina, and João Jorge Santos Rodrigues, director of Olodum, the film is as much a portrait of the mature architect as a eulogy for architecture conceived with the radical political agenda to respect and inspire the exercise of free will. But, as Rukschcio shows by constructing a playful montage of pedestrians smiling and running around and through the onward splashes from MASP’s concrete gutters, it is a eulogy tempered with the cheerful spontaneity that Suzuki later points out is Bo Bardi’s tribute to the tough, hardworking Brazilian spirit that she understood so well.

In this short film, German director Rukschcio uses helicopter shots, poignant stills, and long shots to present a beautiful montage of Bo Bardi’s most significant projects. The buildings are filmed against the dense traffic of cars, buses, and people, set into, rather than foregrounded by, the industrious city of São Paulo and its population of 11.9 million people. With the exception of Bo Bardi’s former home, the Casa de Vidro which is, appropriately, filmed empty, Rukschcio always opts for scenes where architectural spaces are negotiated by multiple groups of people and programs, full of adults, children, the elderly, the marginalized, actors and parading musicians, janitors, and students.
She films during a windy rainstorm, in the morning sun, at dusk. Zé Celso says of Bo Bardi, “She wasn’t a person who stayed at home drawing something exactly the way it was. . . . Her architecture is not hers, it doesn’t come just from her. It comes from her contact with things, from her work with her team—and she re-creates it.” The film underscores her discursive approach to design, an architectural methodology described by Suzuki and Vainer as evolving “through discussion and constant arguments—because authentic work, something genuine, and inclusive, is built on discussion, on arguing, and on misunderstandings.” Ferraz remembers how Bo Bardi always said no first, always prompted discord to test the validity of arguments that began with her questioning how people would behave in the spaces she designed. What kinds of activities could the building make possible?

The experiences related in this film by Bo Bardi’s younger colleagues (they were students when they began working for her) are confined to projects of the 1980s, including the Social Service for Commerce Building (SESC)–Pompéia, São Paulo (1977–86); the Teatro Oficina (1982–93) and the renovation work in Salvador, especially the Fundação Gregório de Matos (1986–87); Casa do Benin, a gallery and cultural center that commemorates the West African country of Benin; and Casa do Olodum, a center of Afro-Brazilian culture, music, and dance dedicated to improving the lives of Bahian children (1987–88). These works are seen as most emblematic of Bo Bardi’s aspirations for architecture; she viewed architecture as a public service and believed that architects are servants of society—everything they do should be to improve the lives of the people.

A spectacular spiraling aerial shot introduces the SESC–Pompéia, a project Vainer refers to as “almost a socialist experiment in the middle of a city.” This complex project defies comprehensive documentation through individual still photos, and it is rendered beautifully here. Bo Bardi recombined and repurposed the interiors of nineteen low, sky-lit industrial brick sheds to house a cultural program that included a library, theater, restaurant, café, workshop, and exhibition space (1982). She built a 75-meter-tall concrete water tower and two daring, roughly finished monumental concrete structures for the sports facilities, including a pool (1986). Although Bo Bardi celebrated the exposed structural and mechanical systems and color-coded electrical, water, and ventilation conduits on the interior and exterior of SESC–Pompéia, her use of unfinished concrete and other simple materials like wood and river pebbles can be seen as a direct counterpoint to the purely high-tech expression of the contemporaneous Centre Pompidou in Paris by Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano. Unlike the perfectly polished articulation of the Parisian museum, the precision that the unequivocally raw SESC–Pompéia evokes comes through its carefully considered materials and the exquisite erosion brought on by use.
Like Rogers and Piano, Bo Bardi incorporated public circulation to create a pedestrian throughway into the project. In contrast to the broad slippage of the Place Georges Pompidou into the building at Beaubourg, however, she populated her street with handmade furnishings and signage, heterogeneous pavers, and carefully designed garden plots with pebble-encrusted paths. Running through the middle of the site, a large wooden deck crosses a long, narrow ribbon of land that had been considered unbuildable. In sharp contrast to the helicopter views, Rukischcio unbuildable. In sharp contrast to the helicopter views, Rukischcio

In a not-too-subtle homage to Sophie Calle’s 1979 Suite Venitienne, we circulate through SESC, following strangers: a morning stroll through the open gates and across the boardwalk, sweeping up after a long day at the café, catching a smile and a thumbs-up from a friend.

In his interview about the Teatro Oficina, Zé Celso mounts what is perhaps the most compelling metaphor of the film: Bo Bardi’s architecture is a terreiro, meaning “yard,” in the traditional Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé. Edson Elito, the architect who worked to bring the theater project to completion after Bo Bardi’s initial drawings, describes the entire theater as a street (it is now called Lina Bardi Street). It is a continuation of that public space—it was her desire for it to be a public space: “There is the street and the street’s pavement goes into the theater without separations,” he says. As we watch the retractable roof slide over and cover the “street” of the theater, Zé Celso describes the pregnant silence of the space and the way Bo Bardi thought of the theater as a “Candomblé yard with technology.” After this pronouncement, all the sites depicted in silent shots in the film—the MASP cafeteria with rows and rows of table settings waiting to be used, the quiet reading areas at SESC, the theater and its “uncomfortable” seating, the boardwalk in the early morning, the staircase at the Casa do Benin, and the empty galleries at the Solar d’Unhão—are understood as terreiros, defined by the collective activities that take place within them, activities that require preparation and care from the community responsible for carrying them out. Buildings are the physical constructions of social interaction and conviviality.

João Jorge Santos Rodrigues comments that Bo Bardi’s attention to detail and incorporation of Egyptian forms in the Olodum project showed him that she was “in tune” with the culture of Bahia and pan-African culture. Indeed, the excellent 1986 film Lina Bo Bardi, directed by Aurelio Michiles and Isa Grinspun Ferraz, goes into depth on the subject, including interviews with French photographer and ethnographer of the African diaspora Pierre Verger. Bo Bardi used the setting of a Candomblé terreiro to organize the art and artifacts in the lower exhibition hall at MASP for the major exhibition Africa Negra (Black Africa) in 1988. She was preoccupied during the design process with planning events for the prospective spaces; she designed furniture, exhibitions, posters, menus, even “the waiters’ clothes, decorations . . . recipes and drinks” for specific projects. Suzuki chuckles remembering the extent of her preparation of pitanga leaves, appropriate foods, and other symbols consistent with what was customary for the toque or public festival of the Candomblé religion.

Vainer describes the many drawings that Bo Bardi did of events taking place inside the spaces she was designing, and Ferraz and Suzuki corroborate that she often thought about the final use of the building and the opening party before the team even began to work on the preliminary design. Rukischcio takes all this on in what becomes the narrative engine of the film. Throughout, she intercuts footage of a play in the making at the Teatro Oficina: actors prepare with vocal exercises, rehearse songs, take smoke breaks, ride their bikes into the building, put on hats and wigs, and run directly from the street into the vibrant final performance that incorporates actors, pedestrians, Zé Celso himself, tourists, cameramen, and the audience in the joyous, culminating sequence of the film.

It is a pity that the film includes so few of Bo Bardi’s huge, colorful drawings and that none of the drawings that do appear are of her own buildings. Like her powerful voice, perhaps these are better experienced elsewhere—for example, at the Lina Bo and Pietro Maria Bardi Institute, now located in the Casa de Vidro, or in one of the many exhibitions and events mounted since 2014 to commemorate the centennial of her birth. Judging from the success of these exhibitions, it is clear that her belief that “architecture needs life to fulfill its purpose” resonates with architects today. Precise Poetry: Lina Bo Bardi’s Architecture is a wonderful introduction to this empowering architectural legacy.

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Notes
2. Verger photographed West Africa extensively and had been initiated into the Candomblé religion as a Yoruba priest of Ifa. He and Bo Bardi were friends from the 1960s, and Michiles and Grinspun Ferraz’s film is worth viewing to see and hear Bo Bardi and Verger discuss their experiences.