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Some exceptional moments of Oscar Niemeyer

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In this brief text, I will commemorate the times lived by Oscar Niemeyer from 1907 to 2012. I will highlight, in this succinct record, the words from the phase where he began his remarkable trajectory, and was a founder and teacher at the University of Brasília, where I graduated as an architect.

Thus, the text, dotted with crowning moments from his legacy, contains some reflections on the exceptional moments of the architecture from the most renowned builder of monuments and palaces of the futuristic capital conceived by Lucio Costa.

The task of studying the work of gifted and brilliant individuals will always be incomplete, since it is impossible to cover all the literature on them. However, for this written endeavor, I would first like to note that, in the poem Lesson of Architecture (1976), dedicated to Oscar Niemeyer, Ferreira Gullar says the architect and friend taught him how to live and dream.

In terms of the professional life in which creation predominates, the poet says that matter endures through dreaming and transfiguration, in other words, “iron, cement and the hunger of human architecture”. Niemeyer also taught that “beauty is light, not heavy”.

Ferreira Gullar blends poetry, architecture and politics. Oscar Niemeyer (1978), for his part, said that, in the paths of architecture, “sculpture and poetry also intersect. From which, works of art are born.”

By means of poetry, Gullar creates metaphors to depict the outcome of the transfigurations of matter envisioned by Niemeyer. In this intersection, lie his images and metaphors of architectural form. I suppose, then, that, in the form, can be found the lesson of the design, the origin of the initial stroke and the vitality of the constructed work.

Therefore, returning to the path of the poet, the origins of the ideas and singular forms of the architect can be found in the “stone’s sugar”, the “egg’s dream”, the “dawn’s clay”, “the purity of the new” and the “snow’s plume”.

The curved lines and immense bays would, thus, be the realities of the creative dream that produced the honey, required repose, exacerbated the malleability, insinuated the emptiness and brought forth the elegant lightness with which Oscar Niemeyer invented his architecture.

The venues designated for religious worship may be expressions of the categories and attributes that, despite his atheism, pervade the realities dreamed up and experienced by Niemeyer.

In this sense, the Cathedral of Brasília, the little church of Our Lady of Fatima, the Saint Francis chapel and Palácio da Alvorada are among the temples he created, inspirations for understanding the way in which he radicalized Brazilian modern architecture.

At that time, I remember that the angels that would be hung in the Cathedral of Brasília, done by Alfredo Ceschiatti, sculpture professor at the University of Brasília, arrived at the Monumental Axis resting in the back of a truck. It was late afternoon. The city was full of red earth “that penetrated our skin” (Niemeyer, 1978), dust and the extravagant setting of the sun.

However, the path that led us from the university to the cathedral seemed light because the angels of Ceschiatti had arrived!

The empty space created by the concrete beams that, for us in architecture, represented a void, was filled. Ceschiatti’s forms were winged beings, birds poised to soar above the limits of the structure.

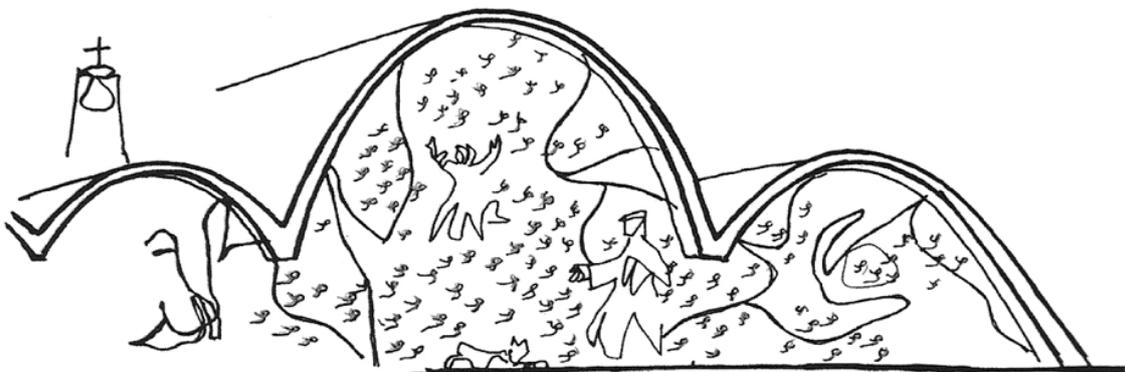
They were home, at last.

The Metropolitan Cathedral of Brasília, observed in an isolated manner, may not be the best example of the way in which the spatiality of emptiness contains the objects and places invented in the architecture of Oscar Niemeyer. However, when the sculptures and stained glass were not yet there, the bays and voids established a ‘between’ space, the interstice, and brought the sky into the interior.

In Brasília, the frame that encompasses the buildings is the line determined by the curve of the sky, which is always used in the condition of surrounding object. Thus, the modernistic attitude that individualizes the buildings characterizes the most outstanding moments of the work of Oscar Niemeyer.

Pampulha sketches by
Oscar Niemeyer

source: NPD / FAU / UFRJ



By the same token, the architecture of the Church of Saint Francis of Assisi, in Pampulha, constitutes an intriguing part of the history of the religious culture of Minas Gerais. There, Niemeyer's arches circumscribe the firmament in the interior.

Designed in this contained manner, the sky of Saint Francis is on the scale of people.

In Brasília, in the Cathedral, the sky is on the scale of the universe.

However, the outer beam curving upward toward the heavens, in Our Lady of Fatima Church, provides another example of emptiness. The outer void is the path to heaven suggested by the architect to believers.

In the chapel of Palácio da Alvorada, the gentle curve of the walls once again demonstrates that Niemeyer's lines display balance and proportion. There, the colonnade of the so-called "big house", in jubilation, strengthens the gesture with which the architect sets it free to sing to the nation!

However, given the immense number of ideas conceived and the quantity of works built, which comprise Niemeyer's architecture, it is impossible, on this occasion, to broaden the study. But, there are other exemplary lessons which can be cited.

Niemeyer (1978) says that, when conceiving an architectural design, for some architects, "it is function that matters". For others, he continues, creation "includes beauty, fantasy, architectural surprise which, for me, constitutes the very nature of architecture".

"Architecture-sculpture, loose and dominating form over infinite spaces" would thus be representative of one of the "most apparent qualities of man in ecstasy before this fascinating universe in which he lives". Niemeyer (1978)

In the marquee of the Oca, in Ibirapuera Park, an even characteristic model of the curved lines of Niemeyer's work can be found. The language, resulting from the free gesture of the architect who creates an undulated balance, flush with passion and eroticism, has the 'poetic voice' of a hermaphrodite in joy and ecstasy.

In Curitiba, the eye of the Oscar Niemeyer Museum (MON), the stairs and large bays, as well as the immense balances of the main block, surpass many of the unexpected forms he had created in the past. In the MON, the change of program led to the realization of a modern theme, confirming, once again, the spectacular use of concrete and technique. The architect, experimenting with isolated forms, demonstrates therein how much he contributed to the development of the historic structures of domes, arches and ogives.

For Niemeyer (1978), the onset of Modernism was full of fantasy and imagination. However, in the 1930s, functionalism and what was then called contemporary architecture could not achieve the formal metamorphoses made possible by concrete, because they were based on the limited existence of construction techniques and the vocabulary of "cold and repetitious".

The building for the seat of the Ministry of Education and Health, in Rio de Janeiro, was considered by Niemeyer to be the foundation of the Modern Movement in Brazil. However, in his view, it is the architectural ensemble of Pampulha, in Belo Horizonte, which marks the beginning of “our architecture, based on a free and creative form which has characterized it until today”. (Niemeyer, 1975)

In his comments on the architecture of the forms of Pampulha, I find the origin and explanation of lines and spaces, since, with respect to critics and criticism, he said that “the curve itself, that so perturbed them, they drew in a weak and feeble manner, not feeling it, as we did, as being structured, composed of curved and straight lines”.

In Brasília, the enthusiastic experiences with more plastic form and the concern for strict perimeters, which should be regular and symbolic, caused Niemeyer to abandon typical modernist architecture.

The flight from formalism and monotony led to the even bigger bays and also the formidable balances that combined structure and innovation. Created under the brand of a new national identity, our architecture would thus be detached from Baroque and absolute formalism, minimalism and functional, Miesian and purist architecture.

Plastic freedom, the simple ways of the Free City, where workers camped out, the problems with land and agrarian reform, professional competition and uninhibited design arising from a simple life, which he said to long for, was all that Oscar had in mind when his goal was to build palatial structures in just 12 months. (Niemeyer, 1961)

In 1970, due to the persecution and atrocities committed by the military dictatorship, like many other intellectuals and artists, Oscar Niemeyer left Brazil to engage in international experiences. And regarding the numerous works in many countries, despite the aversion toward the poverty that surrounded him under many different aspects, he said, in 1975:

“There stood my architecture before the civilized world that will one day judge it, on the basis of time and the sensitivity of men.”

Thus, Architecture continued being the product of place and poetry, taught Oscar Niemeyer.

Cabo Branco Station, in João Pessoa - Designed by Oscar Niemeyer - photo: Cristiane Rose Duarte



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