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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3rr8f76f>

Journal

Places, 19(2)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

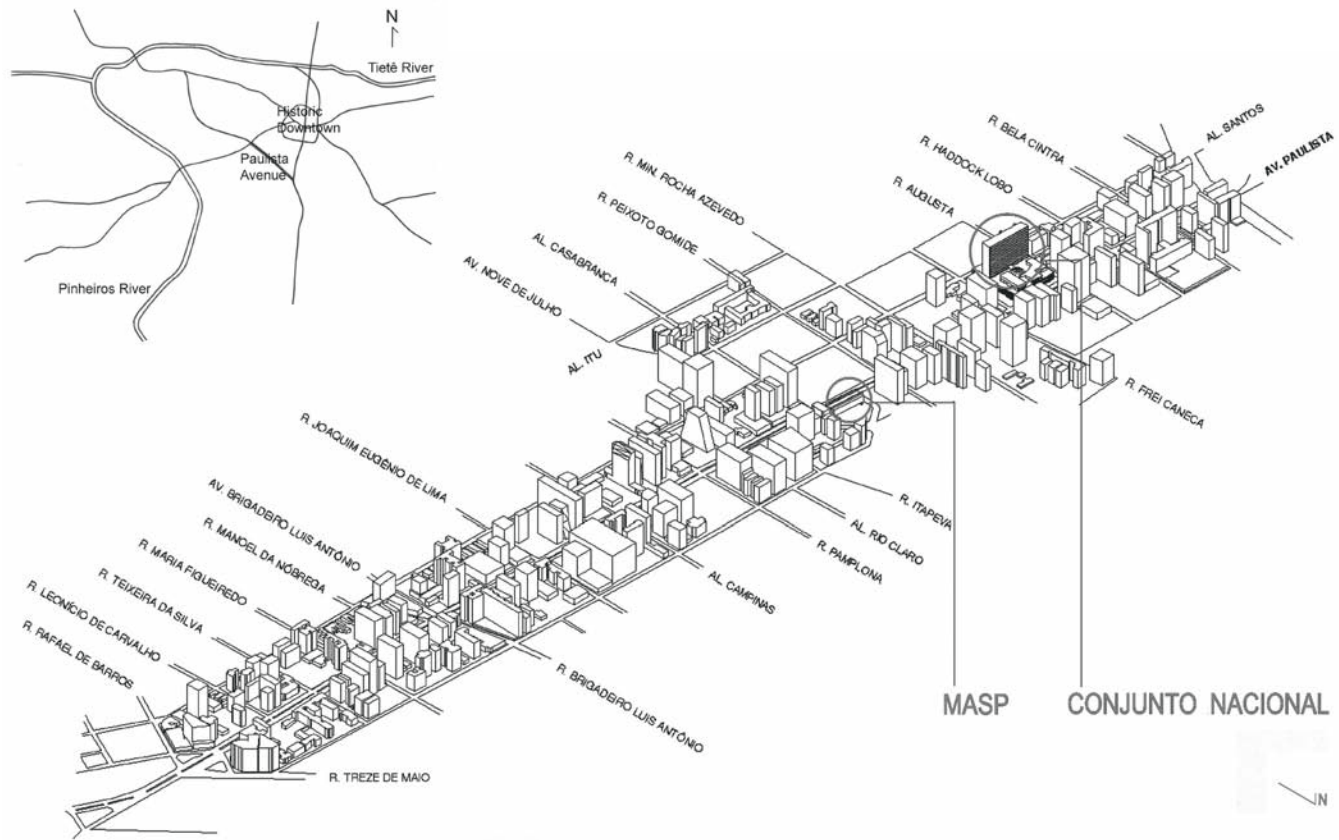
2007-08-15

Peer reviewed

Architecture and Public Space: Lessons From São Paulo

Zeuler R.M.A. Lima





As I lifted my camera to photograph Conjunto Nacional, São Paulo’s largest mixed-use complex, a security guard stopped me. “You can’t take pictures of that building; it’s private property,” he announced.

From where I was, everything I could see—the expanse of Avenida Paulista and the slit of sky above its canyon of buildings—seemed to contradict his statement.

“I’m standing on a public walkway,” I argued, “paid for with tax money.” He didn’t budge.

Frustrated, I moved away a few steps. As we distanced ourselves from each other, I made sure he couldn’t see me. Then I took the picture anyway.

This brief, puzzling encounter illustrates the ambiguity of public and private domains in contemporary cities. As architects and urbanists, we struggle to articulate collective structures for urban life. Yet the concepts we espouse often materialize in unintended ways and change over time depending on how individuals and social groups appropriate, disrupt and transform spaces we design.

The histories of two mid-twentieth-century landmarks in São Paulo, the Conjunto Nacional (National Complex), designed by David Libeskind, and the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), designed by Lina Bo Bardi,

provide lessons on this unstable relationship between design intent and the ongoing negotiation of public and private spheres.

Sited on the prominent Avenida Paulista, the buildings were contemporaneous with creation of the national capital of Brasília. Both structures also attempted to translate post-World War II modernist debate about enhancing public life—particularly views emerging from the 1951 meeting of CIAM (Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne), which focused on “the Heart of the City.”¹

While projects illustrating the historic and geographic unfolding of these ideas in Europe and North America are relatively well known, similar projects in Latin America are not.² Neither is the contemporary condition of these projects.

Opposite: Avenida Paulista seen from the roof terrace of Conjunto Nacional.

Above: Avenida Paulista. Axonometric highlighting the location of Conjunto Nacional and the Museu de Arte de São Paulo. Drawing by author, Sabri Farouki, and Sujat al Kahn.



The Avenida Paulista

Both Conjunto Nacional and MASP were important milestones in the transformation of São Paulo in the 1950s and 60s. In 1950, the city's population was two-and-a-half million, but this number would nearly double in the following decade as the city became a modern capitalist metropolis. The Avenida Paulista would be at the core of this transformation and subsequent disputes over collective spaces and symbolic representation.

Laid out in 1891, Avenida Paulista was originally the main street of a sumptuous residential development created with money from the international coffee trade. But the stock market crash of 1929 devastated the coffee economy, and the resultant shift in economic and political power in Brazil brought an increase in industrialization and commerce to the city. In the years that followed, new emerging elites changed the city's physiognomy. In particular, the character of Avenida Paulista was fundamentally altered by a 1936 law lifting its previous single-family zoning.

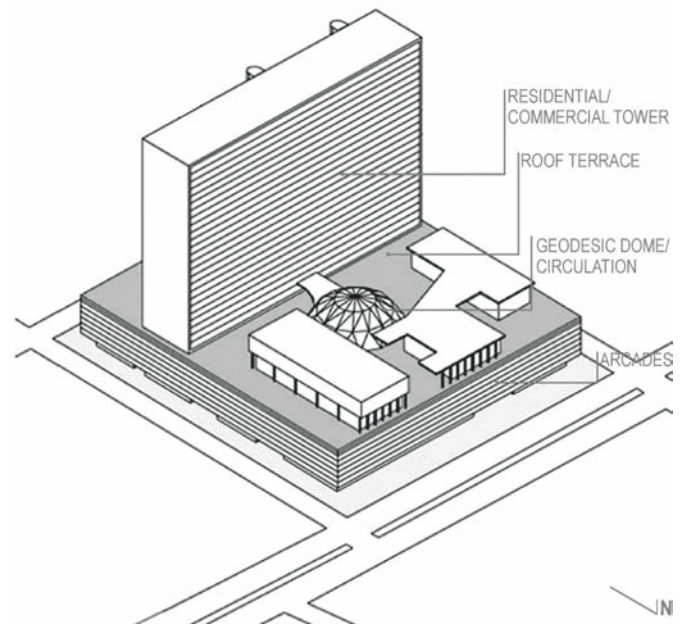
Important changes to the area also resulted from a master plan for São Paulo designed by the engineer Prestes Maia (Plano de Avenidas, 1930), and based on Daniel Burnham's model for Chicago.³ Among other things, Maia's plan designated Avenida Paulista as one of the city's main arteries. The plan was partly implemented when Maia served as mayor, from 1940 to 1945. But it was never entirely completed, and the few isolated segments that were realized benefited real estate and highrise development in the city's southwest, leaving other areas, notably its poorer east side, underserved.

As a result of these social, political and economic changes, Avenida Paulista went from being a boulevard lined with eclectically styled villas to a highrise business district. Indeed, as São Paulo expanded horizontally and vertically in the second part of the twentieth century, the avenue largely replaced the historic downtown as the commercial and cultural center of the city.⁴ Construction of Conjunto Nacional and MASP helped anchor this process and changed the relationship between public and private space.

A City within the City

Conjunto Nacional (1955–62) is the most significant ensemble of mixed-use buildings and semipublic spaces on Avenida Paulista. The developer, José Tjurs, originally envisioned it as a "city inside the city," combining underground parking, shops, restaurants, movie theaters, a hotel, offices and apartments. His desire to transform Avenida Paulista into the "Brazilian version of Fifth Avenue" was a cosmopolitan image that the new Paulistano elites quickly embraced.⁵ To realize his vision, Tjurs chose the architect David Libeskind's proposal for an entire city block southeast of the intersection of Avenida Paulista and Augusta Street, then São Paulo's most affluent commercial thoroughfare.

Libeskind (born in 1928, no relation to Daniel Libeskind) based his design on a functional separation of forms. Formally, it resembled such contemporaneous buildings as the United Nations Headquarters (1947–53), in New York, by a team led by Le Corbusier, Oscar Niemeyer, and Wallace N. Harrison; Lever House, in New York (1950–52), by Gordon Bunshaft/SOM; and two Brazilian



towers by Oscar Niemeyer—Rio de Janeiro’s Ministério de Educação e Cultura (Ministry of Education and Health, 1936–42) and the sinuous Edifício Copan (Copan Residential and Commercial Complex, 1951–66), in the historic center of São Paulo.

The similarity in imagery and configuration of Latin American buildings to others being designed for midtown Manhattan at the time was no coincidence; in fact, it resulted from a prolific exchange between modernist architects around the world. However, the Conjunto Nacional was novel because of its mixed-use program. It was even more notable because it inaugurated a series of modernist arcades that spread throughout the central parts of city in the 1960s. These fulfilled an essential commercial purpose until they were largely replaced by enclosed shopping malls later in the century.

The original design of Conjunto Nacional consisted of a large horizontal podium raised on pilotis over the block, creating space for an expansive ground-floor shopping arcade. A wide, twenty-five-story tower was then set back from Avenida Paulista, with the smallest (western) portion, Edifício Guayupíá, containing apartments, and the other two portions, Horsa I and Horsa II, containing large and small offices respectively.

The ground level connected to all four surrounding streets with eleven-meter-wide passages, forming a continuous interior plaza.⁶ And the semipublic area of the project also included a large roof terrace connected to the ground level by ramps and elevators located under a large geodesic dome.

The half-century history of Conjunto Nacional is full of ups and downs. Initially, the complex enjoyed great public

success; in the late 1950s and 1960s the city was growing quickly, rich and poor areas were more clearly divided, and the military regime (installed in 1964) maintained an appearance of urban safety.

The arcades opened in 1958, and even before the completion of the towers in 1962, the complex had become fashionable. It was served by Fasano, a well-known restaurant, which also occupied two ballrooms built by Tjurs on the roof terrace, against the architect’s recommendation. And it did not take long for shops and movie theaters to relocate there from the historic downtown, taking advantage of the increased affluence represented by Avenida Paulista.

However, this success did not last long. The arcades started to lose their importance in the 1970s as other residential and commercial highrises appeared nearby. Their further demise was signaled by the opening of the city’s first upscale shopping mall in 1966, slightly more than two kilometers to the south.

Corrupt administrators hastened the complex’s physical deterioration. Among other missteps, they allowed a progression of irregular commercial activities to take place and building additions to be constructed that transformed its arcade into an unsafe labyrinth. The building’s deterioration climaxed with a fire in September 1978 that

Opposite and above, left to right: Southwestern view of Conjunto Nacional, highlighting the elevated podium and tower structure. Interior view of the commercial arcades on the ground level. Roof terrace. Axonometric view, showing the functionalist concept of raised podium, roof terrace, and tower. Drawing by author, Milan Kontari, and Sujaul Kahn.



destroyed part of its podium. Between 1978 and 1983 little remained of its initial appeal, and it was even considered for demolition.

In 1984, with Brazil in the midst of an economic crisis, the development group Savoy bought the Conjunto Nacional at auction and initiated a long process of restoration. According to attorney Vilma Peramezza, the building's administrator for more than two decades, its focus has been to combine "good architecture and the continuous life of the complex as a multiuse space."⁷

The work began with physical and infrastructural renovation.⁸ These improvements were followed by an attempt to change the profile of commercial activities there, especially on the arcade level. Music shops and bookstores have since replaced pawnshops; restaurants have replaced bars; fashionable clothing stores and drugstores have replaced banks; and an art cinema has replaced an adult movie theater.

Above: General view of the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP).

In 1998 the renovation concluded with the creation of new gardens and the opening of a large health center on the roof terrace. More recently, in 2005, the Brazilian historic, architectural, and cultural preservation council (Condephaat) registered Conjunto Nacional as an urban landmark. However, this regentrification of the complex has not been without its problematic aspects, as indicated by my encounter with the security guard. Popularity and visibility have returned at the cost of increased private security, a presence that has expanded into surrounding public spaces.

A Museum Open to the City

Three blocks east of Conjunto Nacional, the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (1957–68) has a different story to tell.

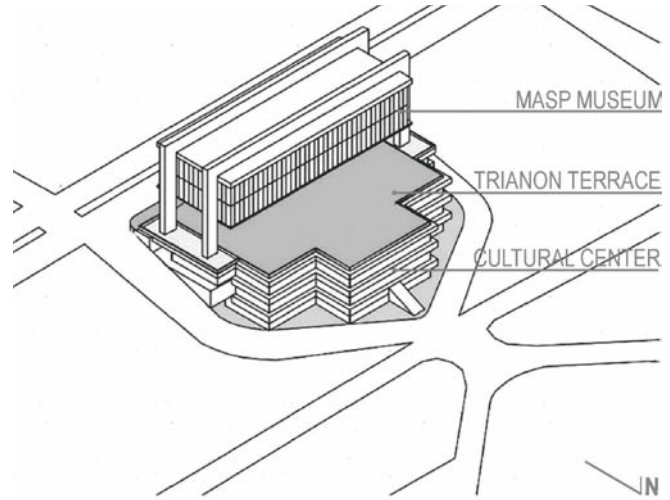
Founded in 1947 according to the cultural model of New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), it houses the largest collection of art in Latin America. The building occupies a prominent site at the center of Avenida Paulista, directly across from Siqueira Campos Park and



over Nove de Julho Tunnel—a key link in Maia’s Plan of Avenues, connecting the historic downtown with southern areas of the city.

The design for the museum, by the Italian-Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi (1914–1992,) consisted of three complementary elements: a semi-buried podium, a plaza, and a transparent, elevated exhibition hall. Before construction of the museum, the site had been occupied by a small, sloping belvedere-park called Trianon Terrace, which included a Neoclassical composition of pergolas sitting on a large semi-buried ballroom built in 1916 and demolished in 1951. A constraint to building on this site was a city ordinance mandating continued public access to it and its street-level views.

In her design, Bardi was influenced by Mies van der Rohe’s proposal for Crown Hall and by modernist concern for open structures. In collaboration with the engineer Figueiredo Ferraz, she raised the exhibition halls off the ground with unembellished concrete piers and large pre-



stressed concrete beams. This long-span solution accommodated both the museum’s large program and the need to maintain public access.

Hovering over a street-level terrace, the transparent exhibition space spanned seventy-six meters. Its original layout further emphasized openness to the city by replacing traditional partitions and hierarchies among art works with vertical glass easels sitting on small concrete blocks. Meanwhile, beneath the plaza, the podium housed the museum’s educational and administrative areas.

From the beginning, Bardi conceived of the large open terrace below the museum galleries as a place of “collective and civil dignity.”⁹ And her definition resonated with a postwar urban and architectural desire to promote public, civic spaces in place of an earlier emphasis on functionalism. Indeed, the Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck described Bardi’s response to the constraints of the site as an “amazing achievement, because the building is indeed both there and not there, giving back to the city as much space as it took from it.”¹⁰

In the late 1960s and 70s, together with her husband, Pietro Maria Bardi (1900–1999), the museum’s director until 1990, Bardi promoted a variety of activities on the terrace, including open-air exhibitions and even a circus. However, in the 1980s and 90s, the terrace was increas-

Above left: Temporary and everyday uses along pedestrian spaces of Avenida Paulista.

Above right: Axonometric model of MASP, showing the semi-buried podium, suspended museum volume, and terrace connected to Avenida Paulista. Drawing by author, Milan Kontari, and Sujaul Kahn.



ingly appropriated for political demonstrations surrounding the end of the military regime. During this period, MASP—and its terrace—gained great notoriety as a stage for the cultural and political life of São Paulo.¹¹

In the last decade, however, great changes have taken place in the relationship between the museum and the city. Cutbacks in public funds have generated budget problems. Concern has grown for property and personal safety in an environment of increasing violence. Art and culture have become more and more commodified. And the growth of tourist activities has profoundly affected MASP's mission.

Furthermore, in 1994 the museum's board named the developer Júlio Neves as director. He soon proposed drastic changes to the museum's cultural programs and the building's spatial organization. He replaced Bardi's transparent easels with tall, opaque walls in 2001, and placed limits on public use of the terrace. At the same time, several proposals to address the museum's escalating financial crisis created public controversy. One such proposal, made in 1995, was to place a rental electronic billboard on top of the building; another, in 2005, was to use adjacent land to build a tower that would have dwarfed the museum complex.

Despite these economic setbacks, layout changes, and restrictions on public use, the museum and its terrace remain a strong collective reference in the social imaginary of São Paulo and the space of Avenida Paulista. And

Above: Southeast view of Trianon Terrace connected to Avenida Paulista and used for weekend antiques fair.

Opposite: Trianon Terrace under the suspended volume of the museum framing the vista toward the city's historic downtown.

to spare the museum from even greater negative changes, Condephaat named it a heritage building.

Still, while Conjunto Nacional has recovered its role in everyday life, MASP's administrative crisis goes on, curtailing its presence in the public life of the city.

Public and Private Spaces in a Global Metropolis

Fifty years ago, Conjunto Nacional and MASP embodied a desire to promote collective sociability in the center of a modernizing city. But now, these buildings are more representative of a struggle between public and private interests in an increasingly fragmented, socially segregated, and violent urban realm.

A new scenario has developed today in São Paulo according to which those who can afford it circulate within and between high-security private spaces such as malls, gated communities, and semi-self-sufficient residential and office highrises. Meanwhile, those who can't afford these freedoms are left to perambulate among sparse, under-maintained and unsafe public spaces.

With the end of the military regime and the adoption of neoliberal policies in the 1990s, business and government leaders in the city have tried to position it within the global economy. However, the resultant concentration of public resources in support of private urban development has only aggravated the difficulties of maintaining and safeguarding open urban areas. As new strategic business districts are created and historic ones renovated, old problems such as uneven access to communal spaces, poor infrastructure, and a lack of social investment remain unresolved.

In light of these changes, Avenida Paulista has again come to define a process of urban restructuring. In 1995, bankers and property owners created Associação Paulista Viva (Live Paulista Association) to recover the appeal the area enjoyed until the 1980s, and this group has mobilized the city to finance renovation of deteriorated physical aspects of the avenue. They have also increased the presence of private security in and around buildings and lobbied city officials to step up inspections of street vendors and restrict public use of the avenue, itself.

The private model of the "city within a city" underlying the Conjunto Nacional—heir of the arcades and Phalanstery of the nineteenth century—clearly fits better into this contemporary context than the public model of the open city and free space promoted by the Museum of Art. It is in this new, restrictive climate that the museum's administration is attempting to limit access to its public spaces, despite the fact that MASP continues to be a major focus for the enactment of the cultural and social life in the city.



Bardi once insisted that she designed the museum not as “an architectural extravagance; it was conceived to be the space of freedom.”¹² Until we can keep our eyes open and take pictures without being asked to move away from the museum space because it has become private property, we have reason to believe that she was right.

Notes

The research for this article was funded by the Graham Foundation and is part of a collaborative effort with Eric Mumford to document architecture and public spaces in Brazil and the United States.

1. Eric Mumford, *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928–1960* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), p. 201.
2. These relationships were further explored in “Modern Architecture and Public Space: Post-War Case Studies in São Paulo and New York” (2000–2004), developed by the author and Eric Mumford with a grant from the Graham Foundation.
3. Benedito Lima de Toledo, *Prestes Maia e as origens do urbanismo moderno em São Paulo* (São Paulo: Empresa das Artes, 1996).
4. Urban historians have since described this pattern of urban investment as the southwestern development vector.
5. Angelo Iacocca, *A Conquista da Paulista* (São Paulo: Origem, 1998), p. 53. Despite

Tjurs’s reference to Fifth Avenue, Avenida Paulista more closely resembles the urban and architectural typologies along New York’s Avenue of the Americas (Sixth Avenue) or Park Avenue. Paulistano is the Portuguese term regarding the city of São Paulo.

6. In his original design, these passageways were more regular, but according to Libeskind, Tjurs changed the project several times in order to guarantee maximum profit. Iacocca, *A Conquista da Paulista*, p. 66.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
8. This renovation has included an innovative recycling plan to process the tons of garbage produced within it, which is today a model program and job generator for other large buildings in the city.
9. Lina Bo Bardi, *Museu de Arte de São Paulo* (São Paulo: IPMLBB, 1997), n/p.
10. Aldo van Eyck, “Um dom superlativo,” in Bardi, *Museu de Arte de São Paulo*, n/p.
11. For more information on the collective uses of Trianon Terrace, see Zeuler Lima and Vera Pallamin, “An Uncommon Common Space,” in Lars Meier and Lars Frers (eds.), *Encountering Urban Places: Visual and Material Performances in the City* (Hampshire, U.K.: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 81–96.
12. Lina Bo Bardi, *MASP* (Lisboa: Blau, 1994), n/p.

All photos by author.