CULTURA AND THE COUNSEL OF ROBERTO BURLE MARX

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1 ABSTRACT

The Brazilian Conselho Federal de Cultura (Federal Council of Culture) was created by governmental decree in November 1966, two years after the 1964 military coup initiated a right-wing dictatorship that would last twenty-one years. The twenty-four counselors had dissimilar allegiances and motivations, but they all shared an interest in the national projection of Brazilian culture. Roberto Burle Marx (1909-1994), now widely considered Latin America’s most significant modernist landscape architect, was an appointed counselor, serving alongside other well-known cultural figures.

This paper examines Burle Marx’s written opinions from 1967 until 1971, delivered to the President of the Republic and published in the Council’s journal, Cultura. His opinions address such issues as deforestation, the establishment of national parks, the place of commemorative sculpture in public parks, and the unique history of the Brazilian landscape. A close reading of these texts, seen in the contemporaneous cultural context of Brazil, provides new insight into Burle Marx’s earlier design work and elucidates a little-known but extremely important moment in the trajectory of his oeuvre, from prolific designer to prescient counselor.

Many of Burle Marx’s landscape projects prior to the period of the military dictatorship are public parks, ranging in scale from the small town squares of Recife to the large parks executed in Pampulha, Araxá, and Rio de Janeiro. After the military coup of 1964, Burle Marx clearly considered his position as Counselor as an equally important cultural project, for it provided a platform from which to develop and promote his ideas of the Brazilian landscape, its relationship to the public realm, and its protection and conservation, even in a milieu in which critical speech acts were restricted.

1.1 Keywords
Roberto Burle Marx, Brazil, military dictatorship, culture, deforestation
2 CONSTRUCTING A BRAZILIAN CULTURAL IDENTITY

2.1 From the Semana de Arte Moderna to the Conselho Federal de Cultura

The Brazilian Conselho Federal de Cultura (Federal Council of Culture) was created by governmental decree in November 1966, two years after the 1964 military coup initiated a right-wing dictatorship in Brazil that would last twenty-one years. Appointed directly by the President of the Republic, Humberto de Alencar Castello Branco, the twenty-four counselors had dissimilar allegiances and motivations, but they all shared an interest in the national projection of Brazilian culture. The landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx (1909-1994) was an appointed counselor, serving alongside other well-known members, including sociologist Gilberto Freyre and novelist Rachel de Queiroz. Many other culturally significant Brazilians spent this period abroad in political exile; freedom of speech and political opposition were often suppressed, yet civilian protests toward government-imposed censorship did occur (see Figure 1). This conflux of culture and politics, specifically a nationalist cultural policy implemented by a military dictatorship, is particularly fascinating as the continuation of a decades-long search for brasilidade, or "Brazilianess," and the national construction of a uniquely Brazilian culture.

The Semana de Arte Moderna (Week of Modern Art), a 1922 arts festival in São Paulo staged by Emiliano Di Cavalcanti and Mário de Andrade, is generally cited as the first emergence of the self-conscious search for a "modern" Brazilian cultural identity, an attempt to establish a distinct identity from European influence. The hero of this search for identity, which looked to the folklore of the Brazilian countryside rather than the European elite, was a compelling character named Macunaima, developed by Mário de Andrade in the 1928 novel of the same name. Macunaima represented the new Brazilian cultural identity—a semi-wild jungle boy embodying the three races of Brazil—the African, Indian, and Iberian. The modernists argued for cultural anthropophagy, or the cannibalism of the oppression of European influence, expressed satirically in Oswald de Andrade's Manifesto Antropófago of 1928. "Only Cannibalism unites us...Tupi, or not Tupi, that is the question," became the mantra of a generation of artists and writers; this cultural argument influenced the development of a particularly unique and "Brazilian" modernist identity in the work of many architects, including Lúcio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer, and Affonso Reidy, as well as emerging in the rich ouevre of the landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx (1909-1994).

This paper reconsiders Roberto Burle Marx's publicly commissioned plazas and parks from 1934-1964, as well as examining his consular opinions from 1967 until 1971, delivered to the President of the Republic and published in the Council's journal, Cultura. His opinions address such issues as deforestation, the establishment of national parks, the place of commemorative sculpture in public parks, and the unique history of the Brazilian landscape. A close reading of these texts, seen in the contemporaneous cultural context of Brazil, elucidates a little-known but extremely important moment in the trajectory of Burle Marx’s oeuvre, further cementing his position as Latin America's most significant landscape architect for not only his beautiful public parks and plazas, but for his political writings.
3 URBAN PLAZAS AND PUBLIC PARKS BY ROBERTO BURLE MARX, 1934-1964

![Image of a plaza with buildings and a large tree]

Figure 2. The aquatic garden of the Praça de Casa Forte, Recife (1938)
Photo by Benício Whatley Dias, courtesy of the Acervo Fundação Joaquim Nabuco

3.1 Public Plazas, 1934-1942

Roberto Burle Marx’s earliest projects, dating from 1934 to 1942, were a series of small public squares in Recife, in the northeastern Brazilian state of Pernambuco, and the headquarters of the Ministério de Educação e Saúde (Ministry of Education and Health), in Rio de Janeiro, then Brazil’s capital city. In both the conception and projection of these plazas, Burle Marx had begun to construct a particularly “Brazilian” style of landscape architecture, parallel to a similar cultural construction undertaken by the authoritarian regime of the president of this period, Getúlio Vargas. The First Vargas Regime, the term for Vargas’s long dictatorship of 1930-45, struggled to establish a national cultural identity and to define Brazilian modernism.

Two of the plazas in Recife, the Praça de Casa Forte and the Praça Euclides da Cunha, are particularly noteworthy. Praça de Casa Forte, completed in 1935, is a formal linear park with two rectangular pools and a central round fountain. Planted with trees from the Amazon rainforest, its reflecting pools contained a variety of aqueous plants, including the famed victoria regia water lilies, native to Brazil (see Figure 2). Recife is not particularly close to the Amazon basin, and its climate is much hotter and more arid than the rainforest. But the presentation of these plants from the state of Amazônia was carefully conceived in this promenade plaza of water plants, and it may have been inspired by the botanical gardens of Kew in London and Dahlem in Berlin, which Burle Marx greatly admired. Very few Brazilians had actually been to the Amazon to observe its incredibly rich flora; Burle Marx brought this diversity of native flora to this middle-class neighborhood enclave in Recife.

The Praça Euclides da Cunha also is an ecological presentation of flora; in this case, a composition of desert plants from the culturally and botanically rich Brazilian sertão, the dry desert, or caatinga, of the interior of Northeastern Brazil. Here, the reference is more literary. Da Cunha is one of Brazil’s most important authors, creator of a rich portrait of the resilience and steadfast character of the typical Brazilian sertanejo, or “backwoodsman.” His 1902 novel Os Sertões is certainly one of the most influential novels in the genre of Brazilian literature. The plaza’s winding picturesque paths frame views of cactus plants and other succulents. Here, the ecological tableau has been enriched with the culture of the Brazilian folkhero, as lionized in da Cunha’s novel.

The projection of both Praça de Casa Forte and Praça Euclides da Cunha as small tableaux representing richness and diversity of Brazil’s abundant flora, worthy of experiencing and preserving, already captures the beginnings of a cultural project that Burle Marx continues throughout his career, through both the construction of parks and the writing of consular opinion.

In 1938, Burle Marx became involved in the first important modernist building of the Vargas cultural project: the Ministério de Educação e Saúde (MES), whose planning and construction dates from 1936-1942. This building, the capstone project exhibited at the “Brazil Builds” exhibition held at the Museum of Modern art in 1942, and widely published throughout the United States and Europe, represented the dawn of the Vargas-era cultural project rather than its twilight, the oppressive Estado
Novo. The Vargas-appointed Minister of Education, Gustavo Capanema, envisioned a new modern culture in Brazil to be established through the vehicle of education (Azevedo). The MES building was seen as a complete work of art, which included architecture, sculpture, painting, landscape, and interior and exterior murals. Burle Marx, responsible for the landscape design of the building’s public plaza as well as two private roof gardens, was invited to join the project by Lúcio Costa, head of a design team including Oscar Niemeyer, Affonso Eduardo Reidy, Emani Vasconcellos, Carlos Leão, and Jorge Machado Moreira. The Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier was an advisor to the project, producing a sketch plan in 1936, but when the building’s site was moved from the waterfront to an interior block, the Brazilian team completely transformed the building’s linear parti into a thin vertical slab on pilotis with a perpendicular low volume punctuated by the expression of the theater, and forever claimed this design as uniquely different from the initial sketch of Le Corbusier. North and south facades of the building were treated appropriately to respond to the specifics of the climate, with the articulation of adjustable quebra-luz (brise-soleils) along the north face of the tower.

Similarly to the public plazas in Recife, Burle Marx again uses a palette of native Brazilian plants, and here for the first time uses the sinuous amoeba-like curvilinear planting beds that become the signature of much of his later work. Pedra portuguesa paving stones, blue-and-white azulejo tiles painted by Cândido Portinari adorning the building’s vertical exterior surfaces, and monumental statuary by Celso Antônio are fully integrated into the design of the plaza. The roof garden atop the low projecting volume is the Minister’s private terraced garden, with paved walkways and raised planting beds, and a second small roof garden is atop the tower slab. These roof gardens foreshadow many future designs by RBM, as well as echo his very first commission of 1932, the roof garden of the modernist Alfredo Schwartz House in Rio de Janeiro, designed by Lucio Costa and Gregori Warchavchik.

3.2 The Parks of Minas Gerais

Burle Marx’s work in the interior state of Minas Gerais follows a fascinating shift of Brazilian cultural and political focus from the coasts and cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo toward the interior terrain of Minas Gerais. Vargas was supported by many wealthy landowners of Minas Gerais as it developed into a burgeoning economic power, and he was politically close to its governor from 1933-1945, Benedito Valadares. As a young man and again as a member of the Conselho Federal de Cultura, Burle Marx often wrote of his admiration of this interior state, its mountainous landscape and unique flora, and its rich colonial heritage, worthy of protection and conservation. Burle Marx designed two large landscape projects in Minas Gerais. The first, the landscape of the extensive grounds and artificial lake of the Grande Hotel de Araxá, the Parque do Barreiro, was again conceived as a representative ecological tableau, showcasing flora of this richly diverse region. Construction began in 1938, during the later years of the First Vargas Regime. This huge complex of a hotel and mineral spa, sited at a natural source of mineral waters and medicinal mud, was inaugurated in 1944 by Valadares and Vargas. The hotel, with its famed mineral baths, became the site of social, political, and cultural events, and brought an era of cultural splendor to this inland region of Brazil, particularly given the Novo Estado’s emphasis on Brazil’s mineral wealth and the promise of resource extraction. The hotel complex is conservative neo-colonial building designed by the architect Luís Signorelli. In 1947, a gem-like modern structure by the architect Francisco Bolonha, the Fonte Andrade Júnior, was constructed on the grounds of the Parque do Barreiro, housing both the source of the site’s medicinal sulfurous waters and the dinosaur bones discovered during the building’s construction. These two architecture styles, juxtaposed so jarringly in the Parque do Barreiro, illustrate the aesthetic cultural debate still raging within the Vargas regime—between a Brazilian culture defined by the embrace of the neo-colonial style, or one that reflected a Brazilian manifestation of the Corbusian international-style modernism of CIAM (Congrès International d’Architecture Moderne / International Congresses of Modern Architecture).

RBM’s second project in Minas commenced during Juscelino Kubitschek’s early political career, during his 1940-1945 mayorship of Belo Horizonte, the capital city of Minas Gerais. Kubitschek later became the third democratically-elected President of the Republic following the fall of the First Vargas Regime in 1945, and he held office from 1956-1961. Kubitschek embraced the nationalistic expression of culture, a project which culminated in the construction of the new Brazilian capital on the high plateau of the country’s interior, Brasília. During the years prior to his presidency, for which he campaigned on the promise of “fifty years of progress in five,” Kubitschek was developing a modernist aesthetic expression of Brazilian culture. His major project of an artificial lake in the wealthy Pampulha district of Belo Horizonte,
intended to supply water to the city, included with a complex of luxury buildings, including a hotel, casino, yachting club, church, and dance hall. The architect Oscar Niemeyer was commissioned to design the buildings, and Burle Marx designed the landscaping of the surrounding lakefront terrain. Although the hotel was never built, the rest of the project was completed in 1943. Considered by many critics as the finest buildings of Niemeyer’s oeuvre, the project cemented the relationship between Kubitschek and the architect, which led to the Niemeyer’s future commission for the design of the nation’s new capital, Brasília. Burle Marx however was not commissioned for any projects in Brasilia until after the end of Kubitschek’s presidency.

3.3 The Brazilian Pavilion at the New York World’s Fair

After the Ministério de Educaçao e Saude, Burle Marx collaborated on another project with Costa and Niemeyer, the Pavilhão do Brasil (Brazilian Pavilion) for the 1939 New York World’s Fair. The designers received a directive from the Vargas regime to export an international projection of Brazilian culture, demonstrating Brazil’s forward-looking national identity. A new term was employed for the pavilion—tropical modernism—which was reflected not only in the architecture style of the building, but also in its artwork, the tropical gardens by Burle Marx, and the very content of the exhibition.

Vargas wanted Brazil to appear as both modern and uniquely Brazilian, and to position its distinctive place in the Americas. The architectural response of the pavilion did not just reflect the principles of the CIAM (International Congress of Modern Architecture), of which Costa was a member, but it added a new expressive lyricism to the modern canon through the use of curvilinear forms and ramps, the fluidity of interior and exterior spaces, and the moderation of the intense tropical sunlight through the use of the exterior quebra-luz.

The exhibition content displayed highlights of Brazil’s economy while downplaying the oppressive autocratic regime of Vargas’ Estado Novo. The country’s mineral wealth, tropical hardwoods, and other natural resources were highlighted. And Brazil was marketed as the world’s largest coffee producer, with a glamorous coffee bar as the focal point of the pavilion. Burle Marx’s outdoor garden, with tropical plants arrayed in sinuous patterns around a small lagoon of victoria regia water lilies, brought an exotic Amazonian touch to this former wetland in Queens.

Shortly after the New York World’s Fair, international interest in the tropical modernism of Brazil’s new architecture led to the highly acclaimed exhibition “Brazil Builds” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1943. Both the history and influence of Brazil’s baroque colonial heritage and its new modern architecture, exemplified by the Ministério de Educação e Saúde (MES), were emphasized, along with the wealth of Brazilian flora and the response of the new architecture to the specifics of the tropical climate.

3.4 Parque do Flamengo and a New Nature

Burle Marx's last publicly-commissioned project before the military coup of 1964 was arguably his finest and most comprehensive—the landscape design of the Parque do Flamengo, a landfill project on Rio de Janeiro’s Guanabara Bay, which was built to transform a proposed highway into an urban park that would serve this densely-populated part of the city (see Figure 3). This park was built during the post-Vargas era, characterized by a series of democratically-elected presidents. The project was conceived in 1957, and it was actively supported in 1961 by the Governor of the State of Guanabara, Carlos Lacerda, a dynamic political figure who was involved in the decline of Vargas’ autocracy. Lacerda re-envisioned this infrastructural highway plan as an urban waterfront park and beach, enhancing the quality of park space for a quickly urbanizing Rio de Janeiro. With the Parque do Flamengo, Burle Marx began to develop a social mission as part of his work as a landscape architect, constructing a notion of the park as a didactic landscape for the urban citizen. This idea was nascent in his early projects in Recife, but here he develops the educative function of the ecological garden as one which engages the citizen in the cultural and botanical stewardship of a particularly Brazilian heritage: its wealth of native flora. “The garden of today is for the man of tomorrow,” wrote Roberto Burle Marx in 1970. He further emphasizes this social act of stewardship, stating “to preserve plant species through the composition of gardens is a way of protecting future generations from an extreme solitude.” (Burle Marx, “O jardim de hoje para o homen de amanhã,” 1970) With the knowledge and engagement of a botanical heritage gleaned from the constructed park, he hoped the public would insist on the protection of its forests and other “natural” areas from exploitation and destruction.
Burle Marx’s arborização, or urban afforestation, of this new terrain, reclaimed from the sea, includes more than 200 different species of trees and 50 species of palms, most native to Brazil, but with the inclusion of selected tropical exotics. This didactic presentation of “nature” is in fact highly artificial—it is a rich ecological tableau of species that would never have occurred together in nature. This new nature, a waterfront park for local residents revealed at high speed through the windshields of a burgeoning middle class heading to the wealthy southern zone of the city, was the culmination of Burle Marx’s development of the cultural project as a designed landscape. Anchored by the airport and Affonso Reidy’s Museum of Modern Art, the Parque do Flamengo indeed posited Brazil as the land of the future.

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CULTURA: A NEW NATIONAL CULTURAL PROJECT

Figure 3. Construction of the landfill for the Parque do Flamengo, Rio de Janeiro (1958)
Image courtesy of the Arquivo Geral da Cidade do Rio de Janeiro

4.1 The Military Coup of 1964 and the Conselho Federal de Cultura

With the military coup, the ambitious and fast-paced publically-commissioned projects disappeared. Burle Marx seems to focus his thinking toward the future, reflecting on the consequences for the ecological diversity he had always championed, as Brazil’s natural resources were extracted and development began to sprawl into the countryside. With his appointment to the Conselho Federal de Cultura in 1966, the military dictatorship provided Burle Marx with a highly effective new forum for the continuation of his cultural project—this one constructed through rhetoric and words.

In the five years spanning from 1967 to 1971, RBM wrote a total of thirteen testimonies for the Conselho Federal de Cultura, and read these at the Council’s plenary sessions, in the presence of the President of the Republic. There were a number of presidents during this period: Humberto de Alencar Castelo Branco (1964-1967), who created the Conselho; Artur da Costa e Silva (1967-1969); the two-month military junta of Augusto Rademaker, Aurélio de Lira, and Márcio Melo (September-October 1969); and Emílio Garrastazu Médici (1969-1974).

Burle Marx’s consular statements of this period, often arguing for the protection of Brazilian landscapes from development and neglect, were as important and influential in the construction of Brazilian culture as his earlier public park projects. In one of his earliest consular statements, he writes: “Unfortunately, it seems that a concern for public parks and for the natural landscape itself is lacking in our country. Even those with a limited capacity of observation would perceive, without too much effort, the offenses committed on our natural landscapes.” (Burle Marx, “Statues in Gardens,” 1968).

4.2 Preservation of the Cultural Landscape Heritage

For Burle Marx, the question of culture and its national definition now shifted toward protection and preservation. The notions of protection, which had been taken on by the Ministry of Education through the establishment of the Livros do Tombo, (the registration of cultural treasures, usually buildings, into the record of national patrimony) focused on the built environment—the protection of buildings. Burle Marx argued strongly for a shift to create a meaningful protective status for landscapes, both historic and
contemporary designed landscapes as well as natural landscapes. Both types of landscapes were vulnerable to neglect and devastation.

The first speech delivered by Burle Marx in his role as counselor, in July 1967, was addressed to both the plenary session of the Conselho Federal de Cultura as well as the Câmara do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico National (Chamber of National Historic and Artistic Heritage). Entitled “Paisagismo Brasileiro” (Brazilian Landscape), he frames his experience as a landscape architect through his early experience of viewing Brazilian plants at the Berlin-Dahlem Botanical Gardens, noting the beauty of plants he had not observed in the parks and gardens of Rio de Janeiro. Burle Marx often writes of this impression (despite the fact that Auguste Glaziou had indeed used native flora in his nineteenth-century parks in Rio de Janeiro) as part of the construction of his cultural Brasilidade. “And it was in order to valorize Brazilian flora that I began to create my first gardens, aided by my wise friend Lúcio Costa.” (Burle Marx, “Paisagem Brasileiro,” 1967.)

Burle Marx immediately states his position, and his ambition as counselor which he would repeat again and again for the next five years: to prevent the deforestation, personally observed over the course of his career, which had led to the extinction of hardwood species and an increase in erosion and mudslides. He notes the observable change in the climate—the increase in torrential rains—that deforestation seems to have provoked. For Burle Marx, the definition of national culture needed to include the Brazilian forest and its diversity of flora. And that “culture” needed to be understood as part of the Brazilian national heritage, deserving of both definition and protection. “Paisagismo Brasileiro” was followed by Burle Marx’s comprehensive list of ten suggestions to preserve this national patrimony, including the establishment of more national parks and public parks, the proper reforestation of devastated landscapes, and the protection of both historic nineteenth-century landscapes and contemporary parks from destruction and damage. In several of his speeches to the Council’s plenary sessions, he insists on the immediate protection and preservation of the Jardim Botânico in Rio de Janeiro as a cultural heritage site. This botanical garden, founded by Dom João VI of Portugal in 1808, was opened to the public in 1822. Best known for its magnificent allée of more than one hundred royal palms, Roystonea regia, and giant water lilies, Victoria regia, it houses more than 6500 species of Brazilian and exotic tropical flora.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS: THE CULTURAL PROJECT

Figure 4. Excursion by Severo Gomes, Rino Levi, Roberto Burle Marx, and Procópio Ferreira de Camargo to the Serra de Parati, Minas Gerais (1952)
Public domain image, courtesy of Abílio Guerra

Burle Marx is an important figure in the long period of the national search for brasilidade. This cultural construct, and its relationship to his practice as a landscape architect, was also a personal quest and a project that continued throughout his career: his first observations of Brazilian flora in Dahlem; his ecological tableaux in Recife and Rio de Janeiro, his large didactic public park projects; and his crusade as a cultural advisor to protect the destruction of the natural Brazilian landscapes that had always been his inspiration.
 Appropriately, one of his many legacies is his personal continuation of the tradition of ecological study and preservation, perhaps equally inspired by Karl Friedrich Philipp von Martius' *Flora Brasiliensis*, Dom João VI's *Jardim Botânico* and Adolf Engler's Berlin-Dahlem Botanical Garden. This act of collection and preservation then initiates a process in which plants extracted from their complex habitats are transformed into living materials for Burle Marx's particular design sensibility. And his design work is now one that is perceived as particularly “Brazilian” and worthy of protection. In 1949, Burle Marx purchased the former plantation Sítio Santo Antonio da Bica in Barra de Guaratiba, a village west of Rio de Janeiro. This 150-acre collection consists of over 3500 species of plants, many of which Roberto Burle Marx collected and even discovered himself during his *viagens de coleta*, his travels throughout the various geographic regions of Brazil (see Figure 4). And appropriately, upon its donation to the government in 1985, this public site has been fully protected by the *Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico National*, and renamed Sítio Roberto Burle Marx.

### 6 REFERENCES


