

# ROBERTO BURLE MARX AND THE CONSERVATION OF THE BRAZILIAN FOREST

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## 1 ABSTRACT

*In 1951, the Brazilian architect Lúcio Costa published an essay entitled "Testimony of a Carioca Architect: Concrete, Sun, and Vegetation," adapted from his letter to Gustavo Capanema, the cultural minister, in support of establishing the Ministério da Educação e Saúde building of 1937-1942 as an historical and cultural landmark of Brazilian modernism. Here, Costa identifies the significant contribution of landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx in the development of Brazilian modernist architecture. While Burle Marx's landscape projects are well known, by the late 1960s he had attained an effective, though ethically controversial, political platform from which to promote a robust strategy for the conservation of the Brazilian landscape, specifically the forest. Appointed by the military dictatorship as a Counselor to the Brazilian Conselho Federal de Cultura, he delivered seventeen depositions, many addressing the impacts of deforestation and development in Brazil. These position pieces, published in the Council's journal Cultura, are translated and analysed here for the first time since their initial publication. Like Costa's initiatives to protect cultural landmarks within the built environment, Burle Marx sought to protect natural landscapes throughout Brazil, many of which had provided both inspiration and plant materials for his garden designs. For Burle Marx, the ecological conservation of the forest was a national cultural project, a position that still resonates with environmentalists today. The "culture" of the forest and the diversity of Brazilian flora, like the legacy of modernist buildings, was to be understood as an aspect of Brazilian national heritage, deserving both definition and protection.*

### 1.1 Keywords

Roberto Burle Marx, Lúcio Costa, Brazil, culture, deforestation, conservation

## 2 CONCRETE, SUN, AND VEGETATION

*"One may see gardens indoors and outdoors, on the ground floor and on roofs, and houses planned so that each room has the extension of a private garden... It all can be summarized as a creative harmony between the buildings of man and the world in which he constructs them."*  
(Costa, 1956, p. 137.)

Lucio Costa (1902-1998) made this observation of the integral relationship between the Brazilian landscape and the modernist language of Brazilian architecture in his 1951 essay entitled "Testimony of a Carioca Architect: Concrete, Sun, and Vegetation," which appeared in the February 1956 issue of *The Atlantic*. The essay, adapted from his letter to Gustavo Capanema, the cultural minister at the time, was written to support of the establishment of the Ministério da Educação e Saúde building, designed and built from 1937-1942 by Costa and his team of architects, as an historical and cultural landmark—indeed, as a national monument—of Brazilian modernism. After describing the inventive use of concrete developed by Brazilian structural engineers, Costa adds two additional elements essential to this unique synthesis of *brasilidade*: climate and plant material, with "nature itself invited to be part of the plan." (Costa, 1956, p. 138.) Interestingly, Costa here identifies the significant contribution of landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx (1909-1994) in the development of Brazilian modernist architecture; indeed, Costa had initiated the career of Burle Marx in 1928 with the commission of a roof garden in Rio de Janeiro with his partner, the architect Gregori Warchovchik. Burle Marx's later roof terrace gardens and plaza design for the Ministério da Educação e Saúde are masterfully integrated into the Corbusian principles evident in the building's form and development. (See Figure 1.)



**Figure 1.** Roberto Burle Marx, Plaza of the Ministério da Educação e Saúde, Rio de Janeiro (1937-1942). Image courtesy of the Arquivo Geral da Cidade do Rio de Janeiro.

Arguably Latin America's finest modernist landscape architect, Burle Marx's gardens and parks are well known, as is his insistence on the use of native Brazilian plants. Less known, however, is his establishment of an effective political platform from which to develop a robust strategy for the protection and conservation of the Brazilian landscape, specifically the forest. As an appointed Counselor to the Brazilian *Conselho Federal de Cultura* (Federal Council of Culture), he described the extent of deforestation and development witnessed throughout his travels in Brazil during his forty years of professional life. Like Costa's earlier initiatives to protect cultural landmarks within the built environment, Burle Marx now sought to protect the natural landscapes throughout Brazil that had provided both inspiration and plant materials for his garden designs. This paper examines several of the seventeen consular depositions of Roberto Burle Marx made during his appointment from 1966 to 1973 to the *Conselho Federal de Cultura*, developing the argument supporting his successful rhetoric through a close reading of these texts. Particular attention is given to the consular statements in which Burle Marx addresses what he considered the important cultural heritage of the Brazilian landscape, its forests, and its flora. For Burle Marx, the ecological conservation of the forest was a national cultural project, a position that still resonates with environmentalists today. His appointment to the cultural council by the military

dictatorship is ethically troubling; however, his use of this political platform to defend and conserve the environment is quite extraordinary.

### 3 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. Roberto Burle Marx was an appointed counselor, serving alongside other well-known members, including sociologist Gilberto Freyre and novelists Rachel de Queiroz and Guimarães Rosa. Many other culturally significant Brazilians spent this period abroad in political exile; freedom of speech and political opposition were often suppressed; and civilian protests toward government-imposed censorship occurred. (See Figure 2.) 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 “Brazilianness,” and the national construction of a uniquely Brazilian culture.



**Figure 2.** *Passeata dos cem mil* (March of 100,000), Rio de Janeiro (1968). Public domain image.

After the military coup, the ambitious and fast-paced publically-commissioned landscape projects that had occupied Burle Marx for thirty years rapidly disappeared. Burle Marx appears to re-focus his talents toward the future of conservation, reflecting on the ecological diversity he had always championed to the reality of the extraction of Brazil’s natural resources and the impacts of industrial development as it 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 what is arguably a cultural project—this one constructed through rhetoric and words.

In the seven years of his service, spanning from 1966 to 1973, Roberto Burle Marx wrote a total of seventeen testimonies for the *Conselho Federal de Cultura*, and read these at the Council’s plenary sessions. The session proceedings, published by the Brazilian Ministry of Culture’s journal *Cultura*, were forwarded to the President of the Brazilian Republic. There were a number of presidents during this period: Humberto de Alencar Castello Branco (1964-1967), who created and appointed 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 influential in the construction of Brazilian culture as his earlier public park projects. These depositions have not been reprinted since their initial date of publication in *Cultura*, but are of significant importance to the oeuvre of Burle Marx. In one of his earliest depositions, 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, *Estátuas em Jardins*, 1968, p. 25.)

#### 4 VIAGENS DE COLETA

Burle Marx’s interest in conservation and preservation began early in his career, and was enhanced while exploring the various geographic regions of Brazil, particularly those the interior state of Minas Gerais, with some of the most important botanists of his time, including Henrique Lahmeyer de Mello Barreto (1892-1962), botanist and director of the Zoological Garden of Rio de Janeiro, and Emygdio de Mello Filho (1914-2002), director of the botany department of the National Museum of Brazil (Rizzo, 2010). Often his excursions were *viagens de coletas*—like the nineteenth century European naturalists Karl Friedrich Philipp Von Martius and Étienne Geoffroy Sainte-Hilaire who had catalogued Brazil’s rich flora, these *coletas* were missions to collect native plants that Burle Marx could propagate in his garden designs. But Burle Marx collected live plants, intended for use in his garden designs, not specimens to be pressed into books. (See Figure 3.)



**Figure 3.** 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.

*“Once again I call for the protection of our natural and urban landscape. We must demonstrate that we are worthy of this rich flora that nature has bequeathed to us.”*  
(Burle Marx, *Preservação de Condições Paisagísticas*, 1970, p.35.)

To support this developing nursery, in 1949 Burle Marx purchased the former plantation Sítio Santo Antônio da Bica in Barra de Guaratiba, a village at the westernmost extent of Rio de Janeiro. This 150-acre site, a former banana plantation carved out of Atlantic coastal rainforest, consists of a collection of over 3500 species of live plants, many of which were gathered by Burle Marx himself. Some were previously unclassified species he discovered during his *coletas*, and these bear his scientific name, *burle-marxii*. At the Sítio, rainforest species were planted in an area he called the *sombral*, an area shaded from the sun with fabric canopies in order to keep the plants moist. (See Figure 4.)



**Figure 4.** Roberto Burle Marx, *sombrol* of the Sítio Santo Antônio da Bica, Barra de Guaratiba (c. 1965). Image courtesy of Sítio Roberto Burle Marx.

Burle Marx developed a pedagogical approach to the design of public parks and urban arborization that would allow every citizen to gain a greater cultural understanding of Brazil's own ecological heritage. In 1985, Burle Marx donated the Sítio Santo Antônio da Bica to the Brazilian government, which renamed it Sítio Roberto Burle Marx. It is now protected by the Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional, the same governing body which protects the Ministério da Educação e Saúde building.

## 5 SEVENTEEN TESTIMONIES OF A BRAZILIAN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

*“And today, when I embark on excursions in search of botanical material that I might use in the creation of my gardens, I note with sorrow the discouraging fact that no matter where one goes, destruction [of nature] is being felt. It is a misfortune that seems incurable, a misfortune that one accepts melancholically, as if there were no possibility of changing this. If we continue to accept that which we see happening, soon little will remain of this Brazilian flora that is considered to be one of the richest in the world.” (Burle Marx, Paisagismo Brasileiro, 1967, p.16.)*

Burle Marx's position and primary ambition as counselor was clearly stated: to prevent the deforestation, personally observed over the course of his forty-year career, which had led to the extinction of hardwood species and an increase in erosion and mudslides. (See Figure 5.) 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 and protect 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 (Burle Marx, *Sugestões para Preservação dos Parques Nacionais*, 1967; Burle Marx, *Defêsa das Reservas Naturais*, 1969).



**Figure 5.** Roberto Burle Marx, seated to the right of Gilberto Freyre, Guimarães Rosa, and Raquel de Queiroz, at a plenary session of the Conselho Federal de Cultura (c. 1967). Public domain image, courtesy of the Brazilian Ministry of Culture.

### 5.1 In Defense of the Tree

In his first testimony to the Conselho, *Paisagismo Brasileiro* (Brazilian Landscapes), delivered in July 1967, Burle Marx evokes the specter of extinction through the example of the jacarandá-da-bahia, commonly known as Brazilian Rosewood (*Dalbergia nigra* Vell.), a hardwood species that was highly exploited during the colonial period and exported to Europe, extracted from forests throughout southeastern Brazil's Atlantic Rainforest from southern Bahia to Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro. Few trees remain today. Brazilian rosewood is a beautiful hardwood with a rose-like scent, valued both as sound wood for musical instruments and as lumber for furniture construction. Burle Marx also mentions the Cedro, or cedar (*Cedrella fissilis*), valued for its timber but also becoming extinct. In March of 1969, Burle Marx delivered another testimony with similar themes entitled *Política Floresta e Destrução das Florestas* (Forest Politics and the Destruction of Woodlands), listing the following native species that were also being devastated by economic exploitation: the Pinheiro da Bocaina (*Podocarpus lambertii*); the Quebracho (*Schinopsis lorentzii*), highly sought after for its tanins for use in leather tanning; the Pau-rosa (*Aniba roseaodora*), a source of rosewood oil; and the Mogno, or big-leaf mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*). The exploitation of Brazilian mahogany, an extremely rare hardwood from the region of Goiás, was as controversial in the late 1960s as it is today.

Burle Marx connects the exploitation and loss of these hardwood native tree species to a much larger system, the climate. "All of these species are practically extinct, and this extinction causes a biotic imbalance, causing as a result a poor distribution of rain. This is the principal reason for torrential precipitation, provoking flooding and high waters, obstructing the river beds, and depleting the soil of its nutritive layer, its topsoil, for the cultivation of plants." (Burle Marx, *Paisagismo Brasileiro*, 1967, p. 96.) Burle Marx recommends that the government create special protected areas for the preservation of these rapidly-depleted forested areas, in order to conserve them for the future.

### 5.2 In Defense of the City

Writing about cultural heritage sites, particularly those in the baroque colonial cities of the State of Minas Gerais, Burle Marx speaks of another kind of deforestation: those trees lost through the destruction associated with the development of urban cultural sites. In his January 1969 testimony entitled *Paisagem Sacrificada* (Landscape Destruction), Burle Marx describes the removal of century-old trees at the Church of the Carmo in Ouro Preto as an "act of vandalism." (Burle Marx, *Paisagem Sacrificada*, 1969, p. 51.) In May 1968 he spoke of a similar cultural deforestation. "In Goiás Velho, they have transformed a plaza with large-canopied trees into an army of lampposts with mercury bulbs. In addition, benches have generously been donated by commercial firms, and each firm certifies its gift through the placement of gigantic letters painted on the seats and backs of these benches." (Burle Marx, *Parques, Jardins, e Praças Públicas*, 1968, p. 15.)

Burle Marx also argues vehemently for the protection of the Jardim Botânico in Rio de Janeiro, its footprint squeezed by the encroaching development and "mutilation" occurring from the city around it. In

several of his speeches to the Council's plenary sessions, he insists on the immediate protection and preservation of the Jardim Botânico as a cultural heritage site (Burle Marx, *Jardim Botânico e Hôrto Florestal*, 1969). 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 amazonica*, it houses more than 6500 species of Brazilian and exotic tropical flora.

Burle Marx often insists upon the need for federal laws that would prohibit what he considered the irreverent alteration of historic monuments. This protection would include their contextual and cultural landscapes (Burle Marx, *Paisagem Sacrificada*, 1969).

### 5.3 In Defense of the Region

Burle Marx's most ambitious conservation ideas, however, address the protection of regional ecological sites at a massive scale through the establishment of new national parks and biological reserves for specific regions in Brazil. Yet any construction of a compelling argument for the protection of national territories and autochthonous plant material was of course a cultural argument.

Brazil's national park system was initiated in 1937 by Getúlio Vargas with the creation of Itatiaia National Park, protecting the Atlantic rainforest on the border between the states of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Minas Gerais, followed by two more parks in 1939, the Serra dos Órgãos in the state of Rio de Janeiro and the Foz de Iguaçu National Park in Paraná. The program then ceased for twenty years, between the dates of 1939 and 1959, but the system has since grown to sixty-seven national parks. Burle Marx's 1971 testimony *Conservação Florestal* (Forest Conservation) included his suggestion to establish national parks at the Serra do Cipó, Minas Gerais, and the Chapada Diamantina, Bahia, both regions with unique ecologies. (See Figure 6.) And in fact these two areas were eventually designated National Parks in 1984 and 1985, respectively.



**Figure 6.** Composite tree at the Serra do Cipó, from Mary Agnes Chase's *Field Work in Brazil* (1901). Image courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

*Paisagismo Brasileiro* (Brazilian Landscapes), Burle Marx's first testimony as Counselor delivered in 1967, was followed by his 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 vulnerable ecosystems. He connected these strategies to the greater notion of cultural stewardship, along with a sense of urgency to act quickly and with resolve.

## 6 CONSERVATION OF THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Burle Marx is an important figure in the long period of the national search for *brasilidade*. The cultural construct he developed during the period of his appointment to the Federal Conselho de Cultura was perhaps as important and influential to his construction of Brazilian culture as his earlier public park projects.

Despite the troubling ethical dimension of Burle Marx's acceptance of an appointment from the military regime, his consular statements of this period reflect his crusade to protect and conserve the the Brazilian landscapes that had always been his inspiration, and that he feared might be destroyed without a robust system of protection.

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NOTE: All translations from the Portuguese are by the author.

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