

THE ROOTS OF BRAZILIAN MODERN ARCHITECTURE

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Abstract

In 1927, architect Gregory Warchavchik built the first modernist house in the Brazilian city of Sao Paulo. The synthesis of local and international, laid down in the works of Warchavchik at the turn of the 20's and 30's, developed into a national version of modernist architecture. The article analyzes the architect's approach in combining worldwide modernist features and national elements, which appears to be in tune with the ideas of Oswald de Andrade laid out in his Cannibal Manifesto, laying a foundation for the development of brazilianness in architecture.

Keywords: Warchavchik, modern architecture, Cannibal Manifesto, Brazilian modernism

Brazilian Modernist architecture has a number of specific features making it an interesting case study of the distinctive nationalism in the context of the international movement. This unique set of characteristics was coming together in parallel with the active formation of a national identity in general. For Brazilian culture the second decade of the 20th century was a time when new foundations were being laid for both the state and society. In 1922, sporadic attempts to import and adapt European trends on Brazilian soil resulted in statement-events such as the Semana de Arte Moderna (Modern Art Week) in São Paulo. The main goal of this event was to provide visibility to the emerging modernist movement and raise the issue of Brazilian national identity in a global context. The participating writers, artists and musicians were, to some extent, already practicing innovative approaches in their work. But the Modernist environment of Brazil was not homogeneous, even despite a lack of representatives. As Aracy Amaral writes, *'In Brazil, internationalism and nationalism were at the same time the basic characteristics of the modernist movement ...'* (Amaral, 1998, p. 21). Nationalism itself also included a multitude of

different manifestations, driven by the desire to – on the one hand get rid of outdated foreign academicism, and on the other, separate from Europe in cultural terms, declaring a uniqueness and cultural self-sufficiency.

At The Semana de Arte Moderna in 1922 the two representative architects were Antonio Garcia Moya and Georg Przyrembel, whose works perfectly illustrate the stylistic "isolation" of Brazil's architectural scene of the time from international trends. The desire to move away from academicism in the direction of national identity, but without reference to current theoretical developments, paradoxically led architects to eclecticism, a kaleidoscopic combination of decorative elements of the colonial past or the aestheticism of indigenous art. Moya presented projects created under the influence of pre-Columbian¹ architecture, with Marajoara style² facade elements. Przyrembel, who was in high demand as a practicing architect even before participating in the art week, presented projects that focused on his main field of interest – the Neo-colonial style, which was quite popular at that time.

Although the projects by both architects (Moya's poetry and Przyrembel's thorough study of colonial heritage) stood out in terms of their superb quality and design within the industry segment, they were not representing any new ideas in comparison to European avant-garde architecture. Thus, their participation in a revolutionary cultural event, points to the inertness of the architectural elite, especially in comparison to other creative fields such as literature and the visual arts which demonstrated infrequent but dynamic manifestations of the avant-garde.

Everything changed radically in 1925, when two architects simultaneously published articles about modern architecture in the Brazilian press. The first was Gregory Warchavchik with the article 'Acerca da arquitetura

¹ The indigenous people populating the territory of modern Brazil before Portuguese colonization, did not have a stone architecture, in contrast to the indigenous cultures of the Spanish territories in Latin America. Pre-Hispanic architecture usually represented in Mexico, and sometimes Latin America in general, could not be used as a national Brazilian feature.

² Marajoara is a pre-Columbian culture that existed on the island of Marajo, situated at the mouth of the Amazon River in Brazil. The Marajoara style was popular in the early 20th century, it embraces works of art made in the style or influenced by the ceramic ornamentation from Marajo island.

moderna' (About Modern Architecture), published in June 1925 in the popular newspaper of Italian immigrants 'Il Piccolo', in the 'Futurismo?' section. Shortly after, in November that year, Rino Levi's article 'A arquitetura e a estética das cidades' (Architecture and the Aesthetics of the City) and the translation from Italian of Warchavchik's earlier article came out in the 'Correio dá manha' newspaper. The text is somewhat concordant with Le Corbusier's ideas, especially in comparing a house with a machine.

To build a house as cheap and comfortable as possible, this is what should worry the builder architect of our times of small capitalism, when the question of economy prevails over all else. The beauty of the facade has to result from the functionality of the plane of the interior layout, as the shape of the machine is determined by the mechanism that is its soul. (Warchavchik, 1925, translated by the author)

Gregory Warchavchik was born in Odessa, then a part of the Russian Empire, where he began studying architecture, and then continued his education in Rome. In 1923 a Brazilian construction company invited him to work as an architect and engineer. He arrived in Rio de Janeiro less than a year after The Semana de Arte Moderna. Two years later, in 1925, he published an article that resonated strongly with the Brazilian avant-garde elite. And two years later, in 1927, he completed the construction of a house considered the first modernist building in Brazil. J. de Lira in his detailed article about Warchavchik's professional trajectory assumes that it is while working under Roberto Cochrane Simonsen, who was fascinated by Taylorism in the face of the expanding architectural and engineering market, that Warchavchik was infected with the ideas of modernism (Lira, 2007, p. 156-157). It is highly possible that during his stay in Rome, Warchavchik had already formed his views on contemporary architectural problems under the influence of his teacher in the Escola Superior de Arquitetura de Roma, and later his employer, Marcello Piacentini. Just a few years later, in 1925, Rino Levi also became one of Piacentini's students. Although Levi's article "Architecture and the

Aesthetics of the City" had a completely different, less defiant tone, and raised the problem of the aesthetics of urban development, it expressed the same understanding of the inevitable transformation of the art of architecture under the pressure of industrialization.

It is necessary for the artist to create something new and to achieve a greater fusion between what is structure and what is decoration; to achieve this the artist must also be a technician (Levi, 1925, translated by the author)

The simultaneity and similarity of these manifestations of the thirst for change in the art of architecture is natural in the context of worldwide changes. Considering the transitional state of the Brazilian avant-garde, it can be assumed that Rino Levi's publication could prompt Warchavchik to materialize his theory without further hesitation.

In 1927 Warchavchik, quit his position, registered his own company and began to build a house for his family. The land intended for construction belonged to the family of the architect's wife, Mina Klabin, who not only supported her husband in this experiment, but also participated by developing and implementing the landscape design.

The construction was an experiment, the result of which could be partly predicted, but not guaranteed. Difficulties could arise even at the project approval stage. As already mentioned, not only was the architectural education in Brazil strictly academic, but architectural practice was also conservative, allowing only for a slight fluctuation of style; deviating within historicism from cosmopolitan eclecticism only to neocolonialism. The project for the house on Santa Cruz street was designed in a neo-colonial style for submission to approval by the authorities. Dispensing with the facade decoration during construction, the architect achieved a clean shape inherent to modernism architecture. Today, knowing the final form of the constructed building, it is easy to spot how the project facade design wisely camouflaged the lapidary volume of structure with panels and figured tops of the porch walls. That is, even designing without a

third-party commission, it was impossible to expect a building permit, having submitted the project as is.

The resulting house had a square foundation on a plane, its strict geometry interrupted only by verandas on the rear and one of the side facades. Predominantly traditional techniques (i.e. without reinforced concrete) were used in construction. Brick walls were plastered over to give an impression of solidity. The walls had a bearing function, so obviously the Le Corbusier principles of modern architecture could not have been implemented: the edifice had no pilotis, ribbon horizontal windows or free layouts. The frame of the corner windows that are quite technologically sophisticated, make the monolith structure of the façade slightly lighter, but not as fine and airy as a reinforced concrete structure could provide. The labyrinth of rooms on the first floor is for the most part repeated on the second. The inner space planning of the house is a relevant issue, as it contradicts Warchavchik's statement that '*The beauty of the facade has to result from the functionality of the plane of the interior layout*' (Warchavchik, 1925) The inner space was organized in a traditional Brazilian manner according to centuries-old living habits, governed by division into private, social and service zones.

The significant differences between the building's implementation and the architect's ideas as expressed in his article were heavily criticized at the time. This discrepancy continues to be discussed by art historians today, but just as a historical detail and not a lack of consistency on the part of their creator. Much discussion at the time focused on the fact that the building was not economical – a condition stipulated by the architect in his text. In the absence of prefabricated parts, many elements of the construction and decorative finishing were custom made, contradicting the concept of prefabricated modular houses. All the interior decoration, from furniture to door handles, was made according to the overall design concept, much of the décor was handmade. On the one hand it had the appearance of an integral all-in-one interior, on the other – its unique manufacturing and high cost pushed the interior's execution away from modernist propaedeutics.

The multi-sloped traditional roof covered with ceramic tiles attracted most criticism. The facade walls were raised almost up to the level of the ridge, concealing it from view and thus creating the impression of a flat roof. The functional flat roof being one of the main features of modernist architecture, was made possible due to new insulating material and reinforced concrete. Warchavchik justified his traditionally constructed roof by the inaccessibility of these materials, although this was not quite so (Segava, 2012, p.35). It is highly possible that the decision was made due to climatic conditions, as well as the high costs of such solutions. It is also important to consider the limited access to highly qualified workers in São Paulo at that time.

In summary, the First Modernist House was far from the ideology proclaimed by the author in his text, labelled by some as *the First Manifesto of Brazilian Modernist Architecture*. The architect pulled together all his forces and ideas to create an impression that modernist architecture emerged. Nevertheless, we must admit the key role of this building in shaping Brazilianness in architecture. Here began his search for inspiration in his country's past, and the national architecture developed according to the scenario we know today.

In this context we can distinguish what, in our view, were the two most important aspects of Gregory Warchavchik's experiment: the creation of a precedent and the primary filtration of the elements determining style.

It seems that most of the compromises that the architect had to make, while building the house on Santa Cruz Street, were prompted by his desire to implement the project as quickly as possible. Despite the architectural elite being absolutely unprepared to accept the new architecture and the relatively undeveloped construction industry being unable to meet the technological needs of such a building; it became possible to implement at least a visual embodiment of modernism if not its constructive example. Comparing Warchavchik's house with the house of G. Rietveld built in 1924 in Utrecht, which followed a similar trajectory from traditional project for approval to modernist execution, can help to demonstrate more clearly the specificity of the Brazilian example. While

Rietveld's project also had a two-sloped roof, which was substituted by a flat one, Warchavchik choose to conceal it not even entirely. Rietveld left the inner space division of the first floor as it was in the plan, using the second floor, considered a garret and thus free of restrictions, for creating a space free of walls. Whereas Warchavchik, as mentioned earlier, implemented no innovative space organization solutions, marking a drastic contrast with the clean form of the façade This approach of amalgamation (and not substituting) became the basis for the development of an inclusive Brazilian visuality. If we consider the main characteristic of modernism in architecture to be that the external appearance is dictated by the functionality of planning and stems from the organization of internal space, then the house of Warshavchik can only be called a visual embodiment of modernism. But if we consider modernism to be a search for new visual incarnations of a changing reality, then the example in question certainly meets the criteria; since Brazilian culture was at the time in search of a formula for combining its past traditions with the changes dictated by global progress.

The effect achieved by the emergence of the First Modernist house could be compared to the destruction of a dam. Over the next few years, three more houses were built by Warchavchik but already on commission.

One more important point that can be classified as a primary filter, was the atypical combination of architectural and stylistic elements. In response to criticism, Warchavchik wrote in 1928:

Not wanting to copy what is being done in Europe, inspired by the charm of Brazilian landscapes, I tried to create an architectural character that would be adapted to this region, the climate and also the ancient traditions of this land. Along with straight, sharp, vertical and horizontal lines, which constitute, in the form of cubes and planes, the main element of modern architecture, I made use of the very decorative and characteristic colonial tiles, and I believe I was able to design a very Brazilian house, perfectly adapted to the environment. The garden, of tropical character, around the

house, contains all the wealth of the typical Brazilian plants.
(Warchavchik, G. cit. by Ferraz, p. 27, translated by the author)

The traditional tiled roof placed in the context of a modernist construction, be it accidentally or intentionally, and the garden designed by Mina Klabin, became an architectural illustration of the most important manifesto of Brazilian culture of the first half of the 20th century – the Manifesto Antropófago (Cannibal Manifesto). Cacti used here for the first time, before Juan O'Gorman did the same in the house of Frida Kahlo and Diego Riviera (Carranza, 2014, p. 37), planted against the background of a flat white symmetrical facade in the style of Adolf Loos, created a new aesthetic, a new visual code where the national became equal to the international.

The Manifesto Antropófago, written by Oswald de Andrade in 1928, expressed the concept of a culture that creates itself, absorbing others, it's own past and other's future. Anthropophagy, as a cultural concept, was considered radical at the time of its creation, later art repeatedly turned to it reinterpreting it anew. Having built the First Modernist House in Brazil, architect Gregory Warchavchik, outlined not only a new look at Brazilianness as such, but also gave the impetus for a courageous approach to modernist interpretations of the national.

One of the vivid examples of the evolution of Warchavchik approach is the new building of the Ministry of Education and Public Health (Ministério sa Educação e Saúde Publica) in Rio de Janeiro, built by a Lucio Costa, a great admirer of Warchavchik's work. Minister Gustavo Capanema rejected the original competition winner's Marajoara-style project on the grounds of not meeting the city's needs for innovative national symbols, so Costa was assigned to create the design. The Ministry building became a symbol of developing Brazilian Modernism; a visual embodiment of the harmonized conjunction of general modernist elements contextualized through national features. Warchavchik laid the foundation for its inherent features: such as the transformation of climate-dictated design into aesthetic elements; unusually deep penetration of the environment into

construction; re-reading of traditional national architectural elements; and finally, the carnivalization of Brazilian visual culture in general.

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