

BUILDING THE TROPICAL WORLD OF TOMORROW: THE CONSTRUCTION OF *BRASILIDADE* AT THE 1939 NEW YORK WORLD'S FAIR

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On April 30, 1939, New York City opened the World's Fair in Flushing Meadows, Queens.¹ Boasting the celebratory theme, "Building the World of Tomorrow," the fair attempted to provide a glimpse of a prosperous and efficient future. The Trylon and Perisphere, two eye-catching structures, served as the symbols of the fair and were reproduced on myriad souvenir items. The 700-foot Trylon, a contraction of the words "triangular pylon," was a pyramidal-shaped building and the tallest structure on the grounds. It housed what was then the world's tallest escalator and visitors waited in line for hours to ride it. At the top of the escalator, visitors crossed a bridge and entered the 200-foot-wide Perisphere, a globe-shaped structure that contained "Democracity," a diorama of a planned urban complex of the future. Stepping onto two moving circular platforms, a six-minute narrated presentation provided visitors with a glimpse of a flourishing city, inspired by the principles of American democracy and made possible through the inventiveness of American engineering. "Democracity" was an urban fantasyland and far from an accurate depiction of the state of American life, present or future. At the time of the fair, the U.S. was still emerging from the Great Depression and would enter World War II two years later. This utopian city was essentially a fantastic construction on the part of the fair's organizers and promoters.²

The impetus behind the fair was, in large part, a response to the current political and economic climate, both domestically and internationally. The U.S. was still emerging from a devastating economic depression and would go to war on December 8, 1941. Although the initiation of President Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration in 1935 helped alleviate some economic hardships, fifteen percent of the population was still unemployed at the end of the decade. Conceived as an economic stimulant to the New York area, the building and organization of such a large-scale event would create thousands of jobs. The fair grounds, a tract of 1,216 acres, were formerly a marshy area that had been used as a garbage dump. Its reclamation was the largest ever in the eastern U.S. Government agencies at the city, state, and

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federal levels all contributed to the costs of reclaiming the land and assisted with the costs of building the grounds and structures.

World Fairs were often organized with the intention of fostering an international brotherhood among nations, and New York's fair was no exception. As was customary, countries from all over the world sponsored pavilions where they displayed their greatest national achievements from agricultural, industrial, and cultural sectors. More than sixty foreign governments and international organizations participated in 1939 and, according to official fair literature, this was the largest gathering in history at such an event.³ Although this interest in brotherly kinship is admirable, it was another false construction on the part of fair organizers and far from a reality. Exactly four months after the inauguration of the fair, on September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland, initiating World War II on the European continent. The false sense of unity at the fair was consistent with a long-established tradition of World's Fairs. In his book, *All the World's a Fair*, Robert Rydell refers to the construction of world fairs as the creation of, "symbolic universes, confirming and extending the authority of the country's corporate, political, and scientific leadership," with little regard for accuracy.⁴ Although Rydell discusses this in terms of the host country, it also applies to the careful construction of national identity by those foreign nations that built pavilions.

Like the Perisphere's "Democracy," the Brazilian government's pavilion and exhibits were also fantastic constructions (Figure 2). Using a combination of what were presumed to be universal forms with specific national imagery, the Brazilian government exploited this international event as an opportunity to manipulate its image on a tumultuous world stage. The conditions surrounding the commission of the pavilion design, as well as the exhibits staged inside, provide an access point to investigate the way the government forged *brasildade*, or Brazilian-ness, for its own ends. Seeking to overcome U.S. misconceptions that Brazil was another impoverished exotic republic, the selection of goods displayed, as well as the pavilion's overall design, had more to do with presumptions about U.S. audiences than with a faithful representation of the state of things in Brazil. A close look at the reception of the pavilion in the U.S. will provide a conclusion and partial answer as to whether or not Brazil achieved its goals with the pavilion.



FIGURE 2. Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa, Façade of Brazilian Pavilion, New York World's Fair (1939). Reprinted from Stamo Papadaki. *Oscar Niemeyer* (New York: George Braziller, 1960), fig. 57; courtesy of Maxwell Heller.

“TROPICAL MODERNISM”

The rubric “tropical modernism” was widely adopted for the purposes of the fair and was intended to describe the architecture of the Brazilian Pavilion, in addition to the objects and goods displayed, as belonging to an industrially modern country located in the tropics.⁵ Designed by Brazilians, Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, the pavilion epitomized this tropical version of modernism. Drawing on the tenets of modern architecture, the small L-shaped, two-story structure was painted white and constructed of reinforced concrete and plate glass walls (Figure 3).⁶ The upper floor of the rectangular façade (one arm of the L) was covered with *brises-soleil* louvers that help regulate heat and light in hot climates. A long curved ramp extending from the façade gave visitors access to the second floor and echoed the gentle curves of the back half of the building (the other arm of the L). Although constructed on a small lot, the building’s glass walls made use of the ample summer light to enhance the appearance of its size. The ground floor housed recreational spaces, including a restaurant, dance floor,

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and coffee bar, all of which opened onto an exotic garden (Figure 4). The landscape design was fully integrated into the pavilion's overall program and would have been more readily recognizable as tropical than the architectural style would have been.⁷ The lush grounds included many of the exotic flora and fauna indigenous to Brazil. A lily-pond with storks, a snake pit, an

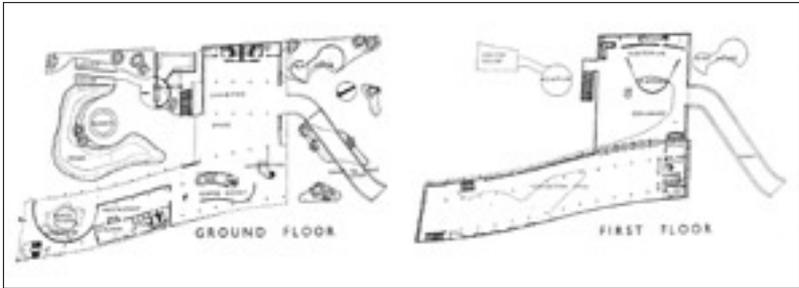


FIGURE 3. Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa, Brazilian Pavilion Plan, New York World's Fair (1939). Reprinted from Stamo Papadaki. *Oscar Niemeyer* (New York: George Braziller, 1960), fig. 59; courtesy of Maxwell Heller.



FIGURE 4. Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa, Brazilian Pavilion Garden, New York World's Fair (1939). Reprinted from Stamo Papadaki. *Oscar Niemeyer* (New York: George Braziller, 1960), fig. 58; courtesy of Maxwell Heller.

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aquarium, an orchid house, and an aviary all tempered the austerity of the modern architecture to convey a sense of its tropical modernism.

Costa and Niemeyer's plan drew largely on the visual and formal language of International Style architecture. The International Style was developed by European architects in the 1920s and became known primarily in the U.S. thanks to a landmark exhibition held at the Museum of Modern Art in 1932, which gave the movement its title.⁸ As defined in the catalogue, the style was visually characterized by undecorated, rectilinear, white structures, and adhered to three, "distinguishing aesthetic principles: emphasis upon volume-space enclosed by thin planes or surfaces as opposed to the suggestion of mass and solidity; regularity as opposed to symmetry or other kinds of obvious balance; and lastly, dependence upon the intrinsic elegance of materials, technical perfection, and fine proportions, as opposed to applied ornament."⁹

In 1928, the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) was founded in Switzerland by a group of twenty-eight European architects, where it served as an organizing body for architects and sponsors of international conferences. Swiss born architect, Le Corbusier is commonly considered the principal architect associated with the style, due to his prolific writing, as well as his leadership role in CIAM. Costa and Niemeyer were familiar with the architectural language of the International Style because of CIAM's publications and Le Corbusier's previous visits to Brazil.¹⁰ The integration of a flat roof, *pilotis* (support columns), non load-bearing walls, *brises-soleil*, and a garden into the design of the Brazilian pavilion could all be directly linked to Le Corbusian principles of architecture and were immediately recognized as such. What culture was this building representing if it was making use of International Style idioms? Instead of utilizing colonial architectural styles, which would have been more readily recognized as Brazilian, or at least as Latin American, a style was used that belonged to a more common international language. Could this even be considered Brazilian architecture? According to Costa and Niemeyer, their repeated use of subtle curvilinear forms instead of the right angles typical of Le Corbusier marked the building as Brazilian not international.¹¹ Niemeyer wrote, "I am not attracted to straight angles or to the straight line, hard and inflexible, created by man. I am attracted to free-flowing, sensual curves. The curves that I find in the mountains of my country, in the sinuousness of its rivers, in

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the waves of the ocean, and on the body of the beloved women.”¹² Costa and Niemeyer argued that curvilinear forms related to the topography of Brazil and therefore served as evidence of their “tropical modernism.” However, I contend that it was primarily a deployment of rhetoric—more than these subtle formal devices—that marked the building as Brazilian.

Extending from the façade, a large curved ramp led visitors upstairs to an auditorium and the exhibition galleries that displayed a wide range of objects. Indigenous agricultural products, such as *manioc* and *caroá* fiber were displayed alongside nickel, chrome, and iron ore samples produced by the mining industry. There was also a large display dedicated to the medical profession in Brazil. In addition, the pavilion included a trio of mural-sized paintings commissioned by famous national modern artist Cândido Portinari. The interior ground floor of the pavilion housed one of the most popular attractions at the fair, a coffee bar decorated in lush tropical motifs. Here, one could be served a number of specialty drinks from Brazil, such as coffee, *mate*, the soft drink *Guaraná*, and hot chocolate. Nearby, gemstones were available for purchase.¹³ Adjacent to this area was a restaurant and dance floor where patrons could listen and dance to Brazilian *sambas*, popular *marches*, *choros*, and classical music. This recreational space would have reminded visitors of the Copacabana, one of the most celebrated nightclubs in New York City at the time. The club was named after the famous beach in Rio de Janeiro and evoked the fantasy of warm, sultry nights drinking and dancing to Latin rhythms in a carefree exotic location. The pavilion designers played off the popularity of the Copa by creating a mini-version within the pavilion. This enabled visitors to vicariously travel to the nightclub in midtown Manhattan, or to the nightlife of Rio de Janeiro.

This self-exoticization relates directly to the racial stereotyping of Brazilians, and more broadly, of Latin Americans. This phenomenon is a complex issue in any national culture; however, Brazil is a particularly interesting case since it functioned differently than in many other colonial contexts. The Portuguese began colonizing Brazil in 1500 and instituting the African slave trade, which was the largest in the Americas and lasted through 1850, although slavery was not abolished in Brazil until 1888. Five centuries of miscegenation between Europeans, Africans, and indigenous peoples resulted in a vastly multi-racial and pluralistic ethnic population. On the topic of miscegenation, film theorist, Robert Stam states that it was, “less a

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sign of tolerance than a technique for domination,” and proceeds to explain that, “European male colonizers...impregnated Indian women in order to populate and assert control over the land.”¹⁴ In this context, miscegenation surfaces in relation to the exoticization of the Brazilian body, which is necessarily a multi-racial body. Ironically, the number of Brazilian bodies that even animated the space was limited since one of the principal purposes of the fair was to generate jobs for unemployed Americans.

The careful knitting together of such cultural markers as austere modern architecture, tropical flowers, scientific studies, and aromatic coffee, was intended to portray Brazil as another industrialized nation without forsaking its distinct exotic flavor. A question remains, however: whose cultural markers were they deploying? These markers were as much about American ideas of Brazil, as they were accurate depictions drawn from Brazilian life. Cultural exports like music and dance, as experienced at the Copacabana, generated stereotypical images of Brazilians in the American imagination. Robert Stam discusses these twentieth-century stereotypes and contends:

Misconceptions about Brazil, and about Latin America generally, have become intertwined with sedimented prejudices that are at once *religious* (Christian condescension toward African and indigenous religions); *social* (poverty as a sign of degradation); *sexual* (the view of Latin American women as sultry temptresses); and *racial* (reproducing Eurocentric hierarchies of white Europeans over African ‘black’ and indigenous ‘red.’)¹⁵

It would seem that Brazil wanted to resuscitate its image at the same time it utilized the stereotypes produced by the “sedimented prejudices” referenced above. This pavilion and its contents were a strategically orchestrated combination of what were presumed to be universal forms and national images in an attempt to represent Brazil as both tropical and modern, proving that these terms were not mutually exclusive. Like “Democracy,” this pavilion was not so much a reflection of the status quo, but a constructed fantasy of the future, and yet another articulation of the fair’s theme, “Building the World of Tomorrow.”

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GETÚLIO VARGAS' *ESTADO NOVO*

A few days after the fair's official inauguration, Brazil's commissioner general, Armando Vidal delivered a speech at the opening ceremony for his country's pavilion. In it he exclaimed:

The heroic effort made by Man in Brazil is still unknown to many. Isolated, and struggling against the jungle and the Indian, which he was trying to civilize, in two centuries the Brazilian man has conquered and defined the huge territory, which is Brazil. He consolidated this property, constituted the unity of the Nation, and, at the time of Independence of the Americas, when the Spanish domination was broken into several republics, Brazil, thanks to the prevailing spirit of national unity, which had already been formed, became the greatest country in America.¹⁶

Although propagandistic language of this nature would have likely been typical at the World's Fair, Vidal's remarks also conformed precisely to the political rhetoric coming out of Brazil at that time. The 1930s and 1940s belong to a specific political period in Brazil that saw considerable social and cultural upheaval. This period, referred to as the first Vargas regime, began with a military coup in 1930 that installed the young politician, Getúlio Vargas as the country's leader. The coup was in large part a response to the perilous economic state of the nation, a result of the Stock Market crash of 1929, and subsequent worldwide depression. Vargas used the nation's dependence on foreign markets as a pretext for his insistence that the country must create a self-sufficient economy. He subsequently rewrote the constitution in 1934 and seized dictatorial power in 1937, referring to the period of 1937-45 as the *Estado Novo* (New State).¹⁷ After the initiation of the *Estado Novo*, the government took an extreme anti-regionalist stance on many matters and, on November 27, 1937, manifested this by publicly burning all of the individual state flags in what became known as, the *Queima das bandeiras* (The Flag Burning).¹⁸

Playing the role of the "Good Neighbor," Vargas's Brazil was one of the first countries to agree to participate in the New York World's Fair in the fall of 1937. The Good Neighbor Policy was a result of the Pan-American conference in 1933. Outlined by President Roosevelt, it assured that no

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nation would interfere in the affairs of any other nation within the Americas. With the wars taking place in Europe, many American nations wanted to forge alliances with countries closer to their own borders. Many cultural, political, and economic exchanges took place under the auspices of the Good Neighbor Policy. Brazil had taken part in World Fairs since 1862 but had generally relied on foreign architects to design their pavilions.¹⁹ However, in 1937, Vargas' nationalist enterprise required that a Brazilian architect design the pavilion. Moreover, he was anxious to promote his country as an industrialized nation and felt that there was too much at stake politically and economically to entrust Brazil's image to a foreigner. In light of his extreme nationalism, it is somewhat contradictory that the New York World's Fair was so important to the Vargas regime. Brazil's participation can be explained because the fair provided the nation with a venue to display the range of agricultural products that were already being exported, as well as new industrial and scientific advances. By presenting a vast range of goods and services, Vargas hoped to diversify Brazil's export market so as not to rely solely on agricultural products.

One of the initiatives of Vargas' authoritarian state was the introduction of the concept "*brasilidade*," an evasive but highly sought-after sense of Brazilian-ness.²⁰ The largest country in South America, Brazil's topography ranges from tropical rain forests, to dry plains, to fertile farmlands, and sandy beaches. In these vastly different regions lives a diverse multi-racial populace that has produced disparate cultural traditions and economic structures. *Brasilidade* was an attempt to synthesize all of these strands into one, cohesive, harmonious culture. In order to solidify this new idea of Brazilian-ness, the government began sponsoring competitions for new buildings in an effort to imprint the capital with the dogma of the Vargas regime. The availability of so much state sponsorship triggered the development of an extremely competitive environment between different camps in the cultural sphere.²¹ The culturally conservative faction advocated for what was then the more popular architectural style, drawing on the colonial architecture built by the Portuguese and the Beaux-Arts tradition of the nineteenth-century academies. Modernists, on the other hand, looked to international sources from the contemporary world, such as those espoused by CIAM and Le Corbusier. Amazingly, no single style was ever granted full governmental endorsement; the Vargas regime commissioned buildings from different styles at the same time. For example, in 1939, the Ministry of Finance

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building was awarded to the Conservatives, while during the years of 1936-45, the Ministry of Education and Health building was designed and built by the modernist group. The former utilized a Neo-Classical vocabulary and incorporated marble, fluted columns, and a portico into its massive volume. The latter was a rectangular modernist skyscraper with Le Corbusian *pilotis* and *brises-soleil*.²² Somewhat surprisingly, these buildings were located across the street from each other. In 1936, Costa was selected to oversee this project. He invited a team of young architects, including Niemeyer, to assist him, as well as Le Corbusier to consult on the project. Le Corbusier visited Rio de Janeiro that year and redesigned the Health and Education building. Although Costa's team ultimately modified Le Courbusier's design, they kept many of his key elements. The building is often attributed first to him, and secondly to the Brazilians.

A crucial aspect of *brasilidade* referred to a desire for cultural self-sufficiency. The government insisted on a rigorous nationalism, strongly discouraging Brazilians from emulating foreign models. Severely enforced after 1937 with the establishment of the *Estado Novo*, it greatly curtailed international exchange among intellectual and cultural practitioners.²³ This explains why it was so important to President Vargas to have Brazilian architects, such as Costa and Niemeyer, design the pavilion; Vargas even attended the competition ceremonies. However, this points to a fundamental paradox in the pavilion's program: why were the Brazilian architects allowed to draw on the readily recognizable foreign source of the International Style in its design? Ultimately, the biggest challenge that the Brazilian fair commissioners encountered in curating this project was locating cultural markers that not only fit within the narrow range acceptable to Vargas, but would also be well received and understood by U.S. audiences as distinctly Brazilian. I suggest that through the power of rhetoric, such as the creation of the term "tropical modernism," the commissioners and the architects were able to convince necessary parties that this modern architecture embodied *brasilidade*.

At the time that Costa and Niemeyer were selected to design and build the structure, neither had actually completed many buildings. Costa had studied and taught at the Escola Nacional de Belas Artes in Rio de Janeiro in the late 1920s and early 1930s. In 1931, he opened an office with modern architect, Gregori Warchavchik, the Brazilian member of CIAM, and became increasingly influenced by publications circulated by the Congrès

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and Le Corbusier. However, because of the popularity of Neo-Colonial architecture, Costa and Niemeyer rarely received commissions. Niemeyer, five years Costa's junior, studied with Costa at the Escola before working in his firm. Their other collaborative project, the Ministry of Education and Health building, was still in progress when they began the Brazilian Pavilion, but it would not be officially completed until 1945. The debate between modernism and academicism, as represented by Neo-Colonial architecture, made it difficult for architects like Costa and Niemeyer to win commissions, particularly within the private sector. Thus, modern architecture was still rarely seen in Brazil when it was put on display in the 1939 World's Fair.

The newly formed Ministry of Labor, Industry, and Commerce oversaw the selection of the designers of the pavilion and the exhibitions sent to the New York Fair. A competition for the pavilion design was announced in late 1937, shortly after the government agreed to participate. The criteria by which they would judge the projects were described as follows:

The question should not imply a search for traditional or indigenous architectural details, but for an architectural form, which would translate the expression of the Brazilian environment; and furthermore, that this architectural form be preferably contemporary, in view that the New York World's Fair has, as a principle, established a vision of "The World of Tomorrow."²⁴

Therefore, the jury consciously searched for something that could be understood as a national architecture yet was free of historical references and within a contemporary framework. They awarded first place to Costa's design because it displayed an, "*espírito de brasilidade*" (spirit of *brasilidade*), and second place to Niemeyer for the technical aspects of his plan. In the end, Costa invited Niemeyer to collaborate with him on a new design, which they developed in New York City in the spring of 1938. As their original plans have never been made public, it is impossible to speculate how far they digressed from Costa's award-winning design. What is even more surprising is Niemeyer's statement, given in a personal interview, that the architects were given the freedom to design a new building without having to consult with Brazilian officials.²⁵

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“THE WORLD OF TOMORROW” ON DISPLAY AT THE FAIR

The fair theme, “Building the World of Tomorrow,” was embodied in the design and layout of the entire grounds, resulting in a strong visual cohesion among architectural styles. Deriving from stylistic concepts originating in Bauhaus and Art Deco tendencies, industrial designers, such as Norman Bel Geddes, Raymond Loewy, Henry Dreyfuss, and Walter Dorwin Teague had seduced corporate America with their “streamlined” aesthetic, which dictated the design of everything from toothbrushes to automobiles. This streamlined aesthetic, typified by clean uncluttered lines and surfaces, had a big impact on the fair’s Board of Design and therefore, the industrial designers were influential in the ultimate design of the grounds. “Unity without uniformity” was the Board of Design’s maxim; consequently, many of the three hundred and seventy-five structures built for the fair strongly resembled one another.²⁶ The Board mandated that pavilions could only be two or three stories tall, with a few exceptions like the Tylon. The purpose was to keep a low silhouette for the fairgrounds so that the New York skyline could be seen in the distance. The Board developed some buildings right away to set examples for other contributors; those structures were characterized by steel frames and curtain walls of gypsum board, wire lath, and stucco, ultimately contributing one-third of the buildings on the grounds.

Signage, lighting, and building color were also highly controlled.²⁷ Native materials or products, such as marble and tile, were only allowed on foreign pavilions, although, “replicas of historical buildings and extremely traditional structures were outlawed.”²⁸ At past fairs, countries traditionally designed pavilions to reflect domestic styles specific to their cultural heritage. However, in New York, many national architectural characteristics were streamlined to favor a horizontal, aerodynamic style evocative of speed and technology.²⁹ Consequently, the visual continuity between each national pavilion was rather surprising at times. For example, the pavilions representing France and Venezuela had less a degree of difference than one might expect. Not only do each of the participating countries have discrete architectural traditions, but they are located on four different continents with vastly different climates, making their formal similarity even more astonishing. In addition to the customary national pavilions, the triumphs of U.S. industrialization were placed center stage in Flushing Meadows. The “shape of things to come,” as described in a fair brochure, would be made possible by American engineering. Some of the most successful U.S.

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corporations, such as IBM, RCA, Kodak, General Motors, Firestone, and Ford built their own pavilions to advertise their advancements.

Costa and Niemeyer's task in designing a pavilion was therefore threefold: in addition to using International Style idioms celebrated by the Vargas regime, they had to accommodate the strict guidelines set forth by the Board of Design, while attempting to distinguish their project from others. Reconciling these competing agendas, Costa described his objectives for the pavilion this way:

[The pavilion] could not be reasonably thought to stand out through lavishness, monumentality or expertise. We tried to call interest in another way: by making a simple pavilion, unceremonious, attractive and cozy, which would impose itself, not by its scale—the site is not big—nor by luxury—the country is still poor—but through its qualities of harmony and equilibrium and as an expression, as much as purely possible, of contemporary art.³⁰

This statement serves as another example of the architects' reliance on rhetoric to justify their design.

Recognizing the incredible public relations role that the pavilion would play, the selection of the exhibition objects was exceptionally competitive. More than a hundred private exhibitors were invited to compete for exhibition space at the pavilion. They consisted mostly of members of commercial and professional associations, primarily from the agricultural and mining industries with ties to the export market. Towing the party line, Commissioner General Vidal espoused, "national unity without internal differences," and so, ironically, exhibitors were instructed to avoid corporate branding.³¹ According to Vidal, "our overriding preoccupation is to show the world a Brazil which is economically united, homogenous and indivisible in all of its productive capacities."³² The Vargas regime wanted to stage Brazil as a nation of industrialists and so the displays of natural products, such as Brazil wood, caroá fiber, and rubber, were placed in proximity to examples of their industrial applications. Vidal and his team realized the didactic potential of these installations and favored simple straightforward displays, in an effort to counteract the common presumption that tropical nations were carefree,

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chaotic, or underdeveloped. Aware that the majority of fairgoers would not be industrialists but consumers of mass-market products, coffee received more floor space than any other exhibit in the pavilion. The Brazilian medical profession was also given a large display, which included information about the treatment of poisonous snakes, spiders, and scorpions, yellow fever vaccination programs, how syphilis differs in hot climates, and, “the study of the negro race in Brazil.”³³ By pointing to the scientific study of tropical conditions particular to Brazil, the organizers were evoking the premise of “tropical modernism” in yet another way, proving that these terms—tropical and modern—were not mutually exclusive but comfortably co-existed.³⁴

This same lesson was also embedded in the display of visual art in the pavilion. The Brazilian artist, Portinari became involved with the project at Costa’s suggestion. Educated at the Escola Nacional de Belas Artes, Portinari was highly respected in Brazil. In 1928, he was the recipient of a coveted travel award, which allowed him to spend two years in Europe. Before his travels, he dutifully worked within the academic visual language in which he was trained. Upon his return to Brazil, however, he rejected that language for modernist forms and devoted himself exclusively to Brazilian imagery. By 1939, he had achieved a degree of fame and success in the U.S. with an honorable mention award at the 1935 Carnegie International for his painting, *Café*, which depicted the proletariat of the coffee plantations in the state of São Paulo. His 1933 work, *Morro*, was included in the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exhibition, *Art in our Time*, which inaugurated the museum’s new headquarters on 53rd Street while the construction of World’s Fair was in progress.³⁵ Since pavilion organizers were open to non-academic styles and subjects, Portinari was able to gain the commission, and he agreed to create a trio of mural-sized paintings of three regional types: northern *jangadeiros* (fishermen), northeastern *bahianas* (women from the state of Bahia), and southern *gauchos* (cattlemen). The figures, which were painted in a larger-than-life scale with oversized extremities, combining rough textures, expressive brushstrokes, and bright colors, were a deliberate departure from the formal conventions that still dominated art academies in Brazil.

The inclusion of his works points to another ambiguity in the construction of *brasilidade* and the *Estado Novo*’s message within the program of this pavilion. Although the government maintained an anti-regional stance,

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Portinari's portrayal of Brazil was based on the celebration of regional types and differences. Not only did his figures display a range of economic types but they put the multi-racial nature of Brazil's population on display as well, which undermined the politically popular idea of a homogenous white society. Brazilian Conservatives, who advocated for academic styles, also wanted modern Brazil to be portrayed as white, domesticated, and civilized; Portinari's paintings destabilized this falsity. His paintings also denied U.S. audiences of a "heroicized proletariat living in a romanticized poverty... beaten down by blackness and work."³⁶ Instead, audiences were presented with portraits of active Brazilians, working and contributing to their country in all their diversity. Portinari's emphasis on labor earned him support from the Vargas regime, despite his celebration of regional types, especially since the Ministry of Labor, Industry, and Commerce was sponsoring the pavilion. His status as a modern artist would have played an even larger role in his selection. Interestingly, the wall adjacent to Portinari's paintings displayed thirty-one of Brazil's historic flags, including some that dated back to the sixteenth century with a collection of carved reproductions of the Baroque churches found throughout Brazil located nearby. This gallery installation epitomized the careful balance achieved between international and autochthonous forms and subjects.

Remarkably, the pavilion that Costa and Niemeyer built, although seemingly incongruous with then current architectural trends in Brazil, was later recognized internationally as an exemplification of a Brazilian style. The literature concerning Brazilian modern architecture commonly points to a trio of building projects, including the Ministry of Education and Health Building, the Brazilian Pavilion, and the recreation center in the suburb of Pampulha, all built during the *Estado Novo*, as the foundation for the movement that fully emerged in the 1950s.³⁷ The pavilion, therefore, truly did represent Brazil's "world of tomorrow," even though in 1939 this style was still in its incubation. Costa and Niemeyer would each go on to have enormously successful careers and they would ultimately collaborate in designing the modernist city of Brasília, the magnum opus of Brazilian modern architecture. Like many other attractions at the Fair, Brazil obfuscated history in favor of a constructed fantasyland of a completely modern country. In considering the overall design of the fair, we can more clearly see how Brazil's pavilion was attempting to assimilate into a larger international language of the industrialized world. The Vargas regime tried

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to export a, “hegemonic national culture in full possession of its faculties,” even though this was far from the case at home.³⁸

CONCLUSION

The Brazilian Pavilion received resounding praise from a wide variety of critics. It was repeatedly featured in reports on the fair conducted by the international media. The subject of extended photographic spreads in architecture magazines, Costa and Niemeyer were continually lauded for their “superlative display” of Le Corbusian ideas.³⁹ Curators from New York’s MoMA also took notice of the pavilion. In 1943, Phillip Goodwin, curator of Architecture at the museum, organized *Brazil Builds*, an exhibition that chronicled three centuries of architecture in Brazil and culminated with the modernist work of Costa and Niemeyer. Goodwin’s familiarity with the pavilion had provoked his interest in the subject and led to a research trip to Brazil and the subsequent exhibition. Furthermore, the architects became internationally celebrated and Niemeyer was appointed to the team of architects that designed the United Nations building in New York City (1947-1952). Although already somewhat known abroad, Portinari continued to be celebrated in American museums. He received solo shows from the Detroit Art Institute and MoMA, both in 1940, as a result of his participation in the pavilion.⁴⁰ That same year, University of Chicago Press published an illustrated monograph in English, titled, *Portinari, His Life and Art*, making his work and biography available to broader U.S. audiences. And in 1943, he was commissioned to paint murals for the Hispanic Society at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. Even coffee sales in the U.S. increased because of the popularity of the coffee bar in the pavilion.⁴¹

A close reading of the Brazilian pavilion and exhibitions, from within the political and cultural milieu in which they were commissioned, provides a rich example of how representations of nationality can be manipulated to meet specific objectives. With the positive reception listed above as proof, the Vargas regime achieved its goal of being seen as a “tropically modern” country, at least in the cultural sphere. Although Portinari’s expressive paintings and Costa and Niemeyer’s restrained style of architecture may seem incongruous with one another, they both epitomized modernity, which became the carrier of *brasilidade* at the World’s Fair. They employed visual idioms of modernity that were accessible to international audiences,

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while maintaining a commitment to Brazilian identity; they simultaneously addressed, “tomorrowness *and* otherness.”⁴²

Despite Vargas’ attempts, the meaning of *brasilidade* has remained elusive throughout most of the century and continues to plague cultural critics trying to pin down exactly what constitutes Brazilian-ness. This question points to a persistent national anxiety that was not just specific to the Vargas regime but one that reappears in literature and criticism. Such ambiguity is in large part a legacy of the colonial encounter. For over five centuries, racial and cultural mixing produced new, hybrid forms, creating a wide range of racial categories and cultural expressions.⁴³ Religion, architecture, music, language, and cuisine, among many other things, all combined to invent unique mixtures.⁴⁴ Consequently, by the first decades of the twentieth century, it was impossible to parse African and European bodies and cultures from the indigenous bodies and cultures with whom they had combined, an endeavor that has only become more complicated with globalization. One reason *brasilidade* has remained perpetually elusive is that there is no definitive “original” to be consulted. Instead, *brasilidade* has come to signify ever-changing states of hybridity, existing between what are generally considered to be the three principle cultural influences in the region.⁴⁵ In confronting the complex hybridity of European, African, and indigenous cultures, the need for a nationalist project became even more acute during the Vargas regime. For those in political power, as well as the cultural brokers of the time, “tropical modernism” was a fantastic solution answering the call for a modern Brazilian identity.

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NOTES:

¹ The fair closed on October 31, 1939 and although it re-opened on May 11, 1940, this paper does not deal with the second year of the fair, which was largely modified from the original event. Richard Wurts and Stanley Appelbaum, *The New York World's Fair, 1939/1940 in 155 Photographs* (New York: Dover Publications, 1977), xvii.

² Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 2.

³ Although Germany was conspicuous in its absence.

⁴ Rydell, 2.

⁵ This phrase, which was used by many at the time, has reappeared in the literature about Brazilian architecture from the period. See William J. R. Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900*, 3rd ed. (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), 386; Daryle Williams, *Culture Wars in Brazil: The First Vargas Regime, 1930-1945* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), 207-210.

⁶ This description has been culled from several sources, including a limited number of published descriptions, approximately five photographs and the building design plans. Because it was a temporary structure, it has not been as prominently featured in architectural books. Some sources consulted include: Zilah Quezado Deckker, *Brazil Built: The Architecture of the Modern Movement in Brazil* (London and New York: Spon Press, 2001). Williams; and Philip Lippincott Goodwin, G. E. Kidder Smith, and Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.), *Brazil Builds: Architecture New and Old, 1652-1942* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1943).

⁷ Unfortunately, information identifying the landscape designer is not available. Although it resembles the work of Roberto Burle Marx, a frequent collaborator of Costa, Niemeyer and Portinari, according to Niemeyer, Burle Marx did not participate. Oscar Niemeyer, interview with author, 2 August 2006, Rio de Janeiro.

⁸ Henry Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 1.

⁹ Alfred H. Barr, Jr., "Preface," in *The International Style*, ed. Henry Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 29.

¹⁰ Le Corbusier visited Brazil in 1929 and lectured in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. I am not convinced he had a significant impact on Brazilian architects on that trip. He did meet Gregori Warchavchik, who was working with modern idioms and became the Brazilian member to CIAM in 1930. Le Corbusier's return in 1936 had much more impact. It was only after the founding of CIAM and his prolific publications in the 1930s that architects in Brazil really became familiar with his ideas.

¹¹ Jacqueline Barnitz, *Twentieth-Century Art of Latin America*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 169-170.

¹² Oscar Niemeyer, *The Curves of Time: The Memoirs of Oscar Niemeyer* (London: Phaidon, 2000), first page.

¹³ Goodwin, Smith, and Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.).

¹⁴ It is impossible to eliminate race from the discussion, (nor do I want to), but since I have chosen to focus on questions around the construction of a national identity and *brasilidade*, I have refrained from delving into the valences that race plays in this construction. See Robert Stam, *Tropical Multiculturalism: A Comparative History of Race in Brazilian*

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Cinema and Culture, Latin America Otherwise (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 4.

¹⁵ Stam, 1.

¹⁶ Goodwin, Smith, and Museum of Modern Art.

¹⁷ Vargas was democratically elected to the presidency in 1950 and served until his suicide in the presidential palace while another coup was in process in 1954. This event is considered one of the most dramatic episodes in twentieth-century Brazilian history. Thomas E. Skidmore and Peter H. Smith, "Brazil: Development for Whom?," in *Modern Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 164-169.

¹⁸ Williams, 196.

¹⁹ The 1904 St. Louis Exposition was an exception. A large Beaux-Arts style pavilion was designed by a Brazilian architect. It was later dismantled and re-erected in Rio de Janeiro to house the senate. It was demolished in 1981. In 1937, the pavilion that represented Brazil was a gift from the French government. Williams, 193-195.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, xvii.

²¹ Rachel Sisson and Elizabeth A. Jackson, "Rio De Janeiro, 1875-1945: The Shaping of a New Urban Order," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 21, Brazil Theme Issue (1995): 150.

²² Sisson and Jackson.

²³ Claude Lévi-Strauss, who was professor of anthropology in São Paulo between 1935-37, discusses the difficulties foreign intellectuals faced in Brazil after the initiation of the Estado Novo. This information was mentioned in Quezado Deckker, 51, note 42. The original source is Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 1st American ed. (New York: Atheneum, 1974). Because of this, it is highly unlikely that Le Corbusier would have been invited to consult in the post-1937 climate.

²⁴ Quezado Deckker, 55-56.

²⁵ Oscar Niemeyer, interview with author, 2 August 2006, Rio de Janeiro.

²⁶ Rosemarie Haag Bletter and Queens Museum, *Remembering the Future: The New York World's Fair from 1939-1964* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989).

²⁷ Wurts and Appelbaum, xi.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, xii.

²⁹ I am unsure to what degree the Board of Design imposed a style on the foreign buildings. I assume that there was a vetting process and that the designs had to be pre-approved by the fair's Board of Design. However, I have never come across any evidence of this. None of the discussions I read concerning the Brazilian Pavilion indicate the need for approval of their plans.

³⁰ Quezado Deckker, 63, note 10. My translation.

³¹ Quote by Vidal in Williams, 202.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Leonidio Ribeiro, *Brazilian Medical Contributions* (Rio de Janeiro: J. Olympio, 1939).

³⁴ This refers directly to a shift in the social policies concerning race at this time. It was believed that through education, the darker races could be "whitened" and therefore improved. An excellent resource on this topic is Jerry Dávila, *Diploma of Whiteness: Race and Social Policy in Brazil, 1917-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

³⁵ MoMA acquired this painting on the occasion of this exhibition. Museum of Modern Art (New York N.Y.), *Art in Our Time; An Exhibition To Celebrate the Tenth Anniversary*

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of the Museum of Modern Art and the Opening of Its New Building, Held at the Time of the New York World's Fair (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1939).

³⁶ Williams, 217.

³⁷ Pampulha is a suburb of the city of Belo Horizonte, in the state of Minas Gerais, where Juscelino Kubitschek was mayor and then governor, prior to assuming the presidency in 1956. He determined that there should be a recreational complex and so in 1938, he built a dam and reservoir. He then commissioned several buildings from Costa and Niemeyer, including a yacht club, a casino, and restaurants. They were inaugurated in 1942. Portinari contributed murals to all three of the aforementioned projects; the Ministry of Education and Health, the Brazilian Pavilion and the Pampulha complex. The famous landscape designer, Roberto Burle-Marx contributed to the Education and Health building as well as Pampulha. I have read conflicting statements about his participation in the Brazilian Pavilion, which is why I have omitted him from my discussion in the body of the text. Moreover, in a personal interview with Niemeyer in August 2006, the architect confirmed that Burle Marx was not involved in the pavilion project. Regardless, it would be interesting to consider why collaboration between the three became such a popular combination for government patronage. They also all worked together in the design of Brasília, the modernist city that was built and inaugurated as the new capital of Brazil in 1960 (also sponsored by Juscelino Kubitschek, who was then president).

³⁸ Williams, 192.

³⁹ Quezado Deckker, 63.

⁴⁰ On the second page of this book, it is stated: "Most of the works listed were first shown in the United States at the Detroit Institute of Arts; some forty additional works were secured for the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York ... This catalog was prepared by the staff of the Museum of Modern Art with the assistance of the staff of the Detroit Institute of Arts." Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.), *Portinari of Brazil* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1940).

⁴¹ Williams, 205.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 207.

⁴³ This term "hybrid" is prevalent in post-colonial discourse and has been deployed by theoreticians ranging from Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, and Nestor García Canclini, who discusses it specifically in terms relating to Latin America. Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

⁴⁴ For example, the prevalence of slaves in Brazil altered the Portuguese language spoken there; rather than use two forms of "you" – formal and informal – as in most other romance languages, in Brazil the formal version became so widely used by slaves that it is now the standard way Brazilian Portuguese is taught.

⁴⁵ This equation does not take into consideration the large Japanese population that immigrated to Brazil in the late 1800s, establishing the largest ex-patriot community of Japanese in the world. Because they were initially so highly concentrated in the state of São Paulo, and arrived more than three centuries after the Europeans and Africans, they did not figure into the nation-wide racial and cultural mixing and therefore have been occluded from most of these accounts.