Beyond Regionalism: Reflections on Lina Bo Bardi's navigations

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From the early 1980's onward, no theory may have been more discussed than Kenneth Frampton's *Critical Regionalism*. It seems like no idea has been more polemically, controversially, enthusiastically and passionately debated since Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction*. Frampton, coming from a Marxist tradition, pretended to explain the dynamics of architectural ideas into the post-war world, exposing the relationships between center and periphery. However, the common use of *Critical Regionalism* transformed it into another framework that supports architecture's *status-quo* and reinforces the mythology of the lone-star genius creator.

On this paper, I depart from the work of Brazilian female architect Lina Bo Bardi and a critique of Frampton's thesis to speculate into some broader dynamics of hybridims that I believe addresses many of the challenges posed to contemporary architectural practice and deserves a more careful analysis. The current exchange of architectural ideas and products worldwide challenges both the definition of region and the concept of critique as developed by Frampton. The work of Lina Bo Bardi exemplifies that, and this essay discusses her work as an antithesis to current ideas on architectural regionalism as a reaction pro or against economic globalization. Her work challenges the boundaries between local and universal and erudite and popular, resulting in a unique creative process that accomplishes both aesthetic beauty and social awareness.

Critical Regionalism

According to Frampton, *Critical Regionalism*, if possible to define in a paragraph, would be the "marginal practice that although critical of modernization, refuses to abandon the emancipatory and progressive aspects of the modern architectural legacy"[1].

Among innumerable publications, three articles define Kenneth Frampton's idea of *Critical Regionalism*. The first is called "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance"[2]. The second is the fifth chapter of his *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*,[3] added after the 2nd edition, called "Critical Regionalism: Modern Architecture and Cultural Identity"; and the third is Frampton's lecture on "Modern Architecture and Critical Regionalism"[4] at the RIBA Annual Discourse, 1982, published at *Transactions 3*.

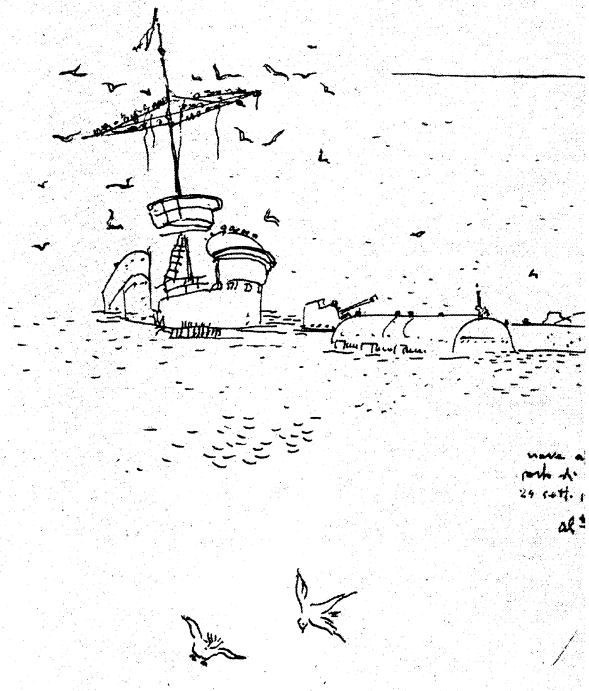A critical reading of those texts unfolds into two major is-

Fig. 1. Shipwrecked, *drawing by Lina Bo Bardi, Naples, 1947, on her way to Brazil.*

sues: First, it implies that the architect is solely responsible for the creative impulses. Here, despite criticizing the star-system and the "current proliferation of highly individualistic forms of expression"[5], Frampton still operates with the model of the architect as a genius creator, giving a few men credit for a whole original culture. Treated as an expression of individual buildings, regionalism is not seen as a collective phenomenon but as isolated pieces in which even the immediate context is absent. In addition, the idea of creative nucleus implies the mirror idea of non-creative periphery.

The concept of "center" and "periphery" encompass the core of the idea of critical regionalism. For Frampton, there is no way to escape such dichotomy, and the only possibility left is to

resist the invasion of trends emanated from the "center" with the use of "local" features as a resistance. At this point I agree with Frampton when, quoting Ricoeur, he suggests a "hybrid world culture" as a result of "cross-fertilization between rooted culture on one hand and universal civilization on the other".[6] However, for Frampton such cross-fertilization, occurs only on the peripheral side of the equation, and the universal "center" is never influenced by the periphery. One should question here how to define center and periphery, problematizing Frampton's concept in terms of historiography and ideology. Instead of trying to invert the map or change the relative scale of each defined region, this essay aims at understanding the passages, the interaction, the possible navigation that occur in the oceanic space between boundaries.
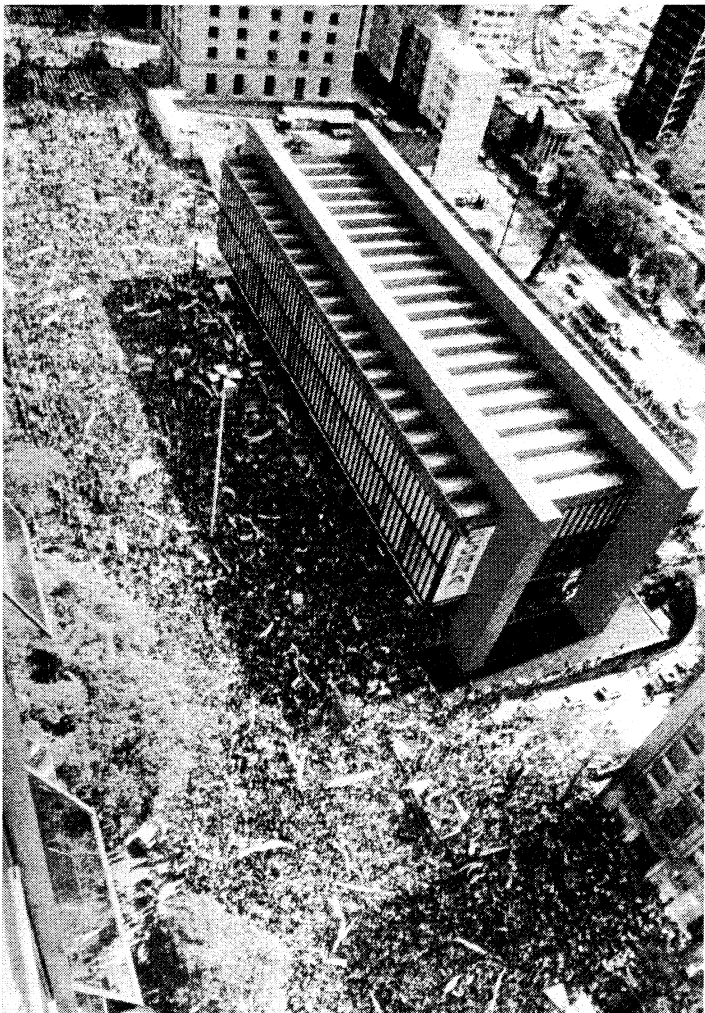

Fig. 2. Bardi, MASP, São Paulo, 1957.

Bo Bardi and the design in site

Lina Bo Bardi has always been a navigator, an experienced traveler used to personal displacements. Born in Italy and trained in Milan under strong modernist dogmas, she moved to Brazil in 1947 where her husband Pietro Maria Bardi would be later the director of the Museu de Arte de São Paulo, MASP. In Italy, Lina Bo Bardi was working with Bruno Zevi and editing architectural magazines as well as writing several articles. Why did she decide to leave the center of Italian post-war architecture and design and move to the Brazilian periphery? In her own words, when she first arrived, the view of the MEC building[7] for those that came by the sea was like a white and blue ship, the first message of peace after the flood of WWII [8]. The metaphor could not be a more precisely fit for this analysis.

As a young female architect working in Brazil, Lina followed neither the paradigmatic building of Pampulha by Niemeyer, nor the Italian neo-plasticism background she was educated with. From the beginning, she chooses to follow her proper path, merging more and more the modernist mission she praised with the Brazilian popular culture. On her first designs we still perceive a strong influence of neo-plasticism and some traces of brutalism as in the MASP building, from the late 1950s. But after moving to Salvador, the most Afro of all Brazilian big cities, to organize the Museu de Arte Moderna da Bahia, Lina Bo Bardi turned more and more Brazilian, a country that she decided to adopt. Working in Salvador on the 1960's, she was able to achieve architecture that is both Afro-Brazilian and universal, like the renovations of Solar do Unhão or Casa do Olodum, or in the many art and artisan exhibition she organized. She also had a hybrid method of design, for she moved to the site as soon as the preliminary study was approved, and developed the details there while they were being built. The result is a careful handcrafted building that pushes the technology at her disposal to its limits, while immersed into the cultural values of the place. The idea of frontier is fundamental since Bardi is transplanted to a completely different environment in which technology has to be re-designed and re-applied. Her foreign eyes may have enhanced the awareness to the local values, but Bardi improved her perception of the "Brazilianess" as times passed. Instead of solving the problems somewhere else and transferring the technology or the solution (the basic paradigm of Frampton's Critical Regionalism), Bardi allows for the raise of local solutions that merge hers and others ideas. Alterity, rather than identity is being used to generate this architecture. In this alterity model, each building is designed in response to its specific demands, with the architect working as a facilitator and guide for the process rather than fabricating a solution under his or her personal style to be then adapted to the site and program.
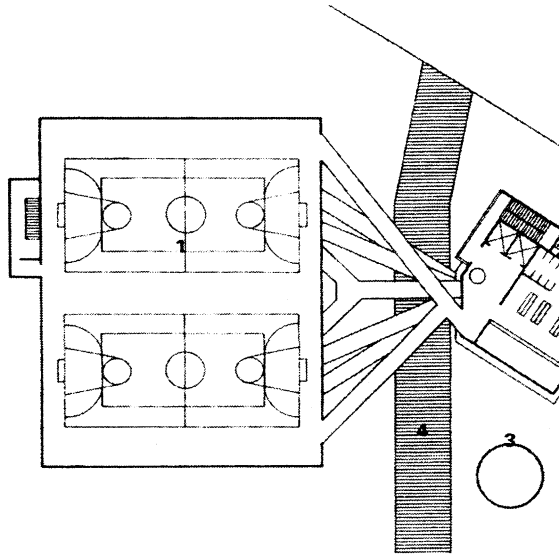
Fig. 3. Bardi, SESC Pompéia, Detail of Ground Plan.

Frampton's one way path and the identity model

Back in the early 1980s when Frampton was first publicizing his thesis on Critical Regionalism it was received as a model very much based on alterity for the peripheral architects to be able to resist universalization. But reflecting on the later work of the architects Frampton chose to present as exemplars one can perceive the predominance of identity from one building to the others. It is also clear that the dynamic Frampton describes can only operate on a one-way path, from the center to the periphery and from above to below. He wrote: "Critical Regionalism will, on occasion, insert reinterpreted vernacular elements as disjunctive episodes within the whole. It will moreover occasionally derive such elements from foreign sources"[9]. A question that arises from this statement deals with the possible inversion on the direction of such influences. It is interesting to perceive, however, that while he talks about "foreign influence", the balance of those influences is inversely proportional to its distance to the very "center". In other words, traces of British architecture would be strongly perceived in India, but India has little or nothing to contribute to the definition of British architecture. The closer to the "center", the more those dynamics are based on identity in Frampton's model, and the further into the "periphery" the more they are based on alterity.

According to Frampton, in order to be critical of modernization, architecture needs to assume an arriere-garde position[10] and mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived *indirectly* from the peculiarities of a particular place.

What strikes me on this statement is the term "indirectly", and I tend to understand the meaning of such as a kind of filter. The society by itself would not be able to resist modernization, and the architect acts here as the embodiment of knowledge, as a connoisseur that filters the local peculiarities with the lenses of his/her knowledge. One of the main questions raised by this paper regards the dynamics of such mediation.

It is clear from the developments of architecture after World War II, and Frampton's articles help us understand it, that modern architecture was desperately trying to materialize in building forms a stability that it does not experience. The confidence in the transformations that modernization would bring had long gone, and architecture does not have the freedom to expanding the boundaries anymore. Instead, it tries to operate further and further from the boundaries, in a centripetal movement that explains the abandonment of social and political concerns in favor of formal and aesthetic trends. The history of CIAM is exemplar in that matter, for each meeting we perceive less and less mobility and more and more of a desperate search for stability.
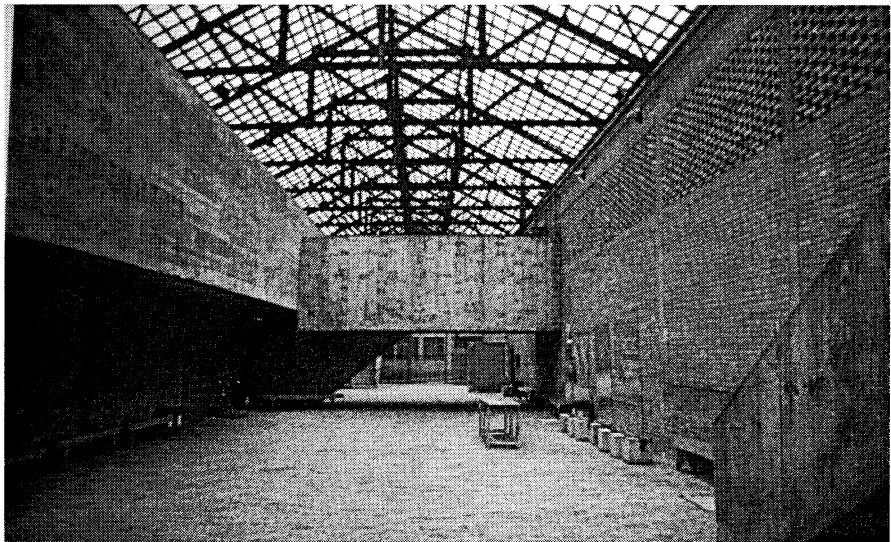

Fig. 4. Bardi, SESC Pompéia, Interior view of Factory Renovation.

Personal styles as anchors

As a response to this desperate search for stability, architects developed more and more their personal styles, their formal signatures. This worked as a good anchor but the following immobility and isolation brought larger problems to the architectural discipline. As suggested by Diane Ghirardo, "from modernism to deconstructivism is a long distance in terms of style, but in terms of the heroic architect formalizing personal interpretations of social crisis there is no distance at all"[11]. No wonder deconstructivism says that there can be no communication or

rational discussion of interpretations. Placed miles from one another and frozen by the development of their individual styles, architects suffer from a serious isolation among themselves and an even worse gap between them and the contemporary society. Solá-Morales adds that "the explication of architecture exclusively in terms of architecture itself is a slack excuse, an attempt to deny the evidence of much broader relationships"[12].

I tend to see Frampton's idea of Critical Regionalism as another anchoring tentative, since it still operates within the star-system in which an architect develops his personal style as a response to the surrounding contexts and conditions. But once this "personality" is achieved, or in our metaphorical discourse, once it is anchored, it is not supposed to change anymore, being applied everywhere. Frampton's Critical Regionalism does not resist current globalization in which Cesar Pelli designs in Kuala Lumpur (and it still looks like Pelli's personal style) or Mario Botta designs in San Francisco (and it looks like his Ticino buildings).

Another interesting point can be raised using this anchoring metaphor. Flotsams have no horizontal mobility, and much less vertical mobility. Once anchored, one cannot move around anymore, but maybe more important than that, one cannot move up to the sky or down into the water. I want to assert here the idea of geographical and/or geopolitical relations as being horizontal, i.e., between two points on the earth surface; and vertical as being the relationship between high-art and mass-culture. The vertical mobility, the ability to take elements from mass-culture to high-culture and vice-versa is as important nowadays as the horizontal mobility. Distances can vary widely in both vertical and horizontal directions. In fact, a place like the MoMA in New York for instance, can be much closer to one's horizontal partners in Europe like the Centre George Pompidou than the low-art of the graffiti in the subway, only a couple of feet below.

Between the dry canon and the oceanic possibilities of hybridism

Going back to the floating architecture anchored here and there by the personal styles, it is clear that to an extent the model developed by the star-system architects are not able to provide the desired stability anymore. Metaphorically we should say that the new information technology added too much speed and flexibility to the capital and the cultural issues involved in architecture, that the personal anchors cannot hold it in place anymore. In a recent lecture at the University of Michigan, Rem Koolhaas, the more social or collective oriented of the star-system

architects, presented an interesting picture of the recent urban development on Chinese new cities. The fact that a famous architect is trying to understand a different urban logic and not only showing his last design sketches and models is already something new. But Koolhaas seemed desperate for an explanation, for a clue that would allow his European mind to understand the fast and vibrant growth of Chinese cities in which traditional urban theories does not apply. Here and there, a number of young (or not so young) architects start to challenge the personal-style system with a more flexible and adaptive approach. Let's call such flexibility, with our speculative license: amphibious strategy.

An amphibious approach would combine the facility and safety of the anchored platforms with the infinite possibilities of the ocean that surround it. In order words, an amphibious architecture recognizes that some stability is necessary, but is able to swim or cross between dry lands, surviving on both environments. An architecture that can be exhibited in any high-culture gallery and can win major competitions with up to date ideas, but is also able to deal with the real world and to connect itself with the context around. In summary, an architecture that recognizes the values of formal concerns but is also able to address social or collective issues.
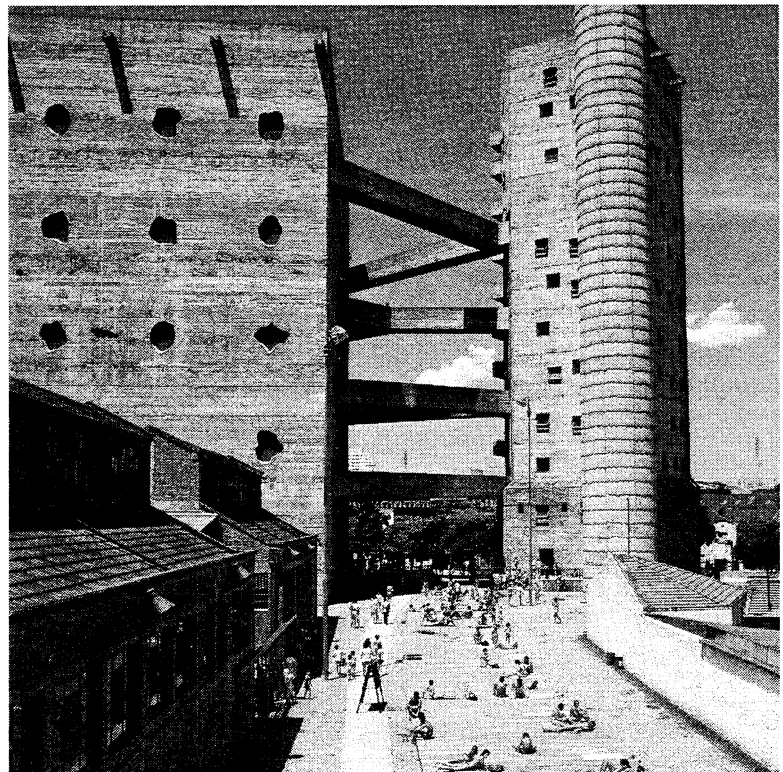

Fig. 5. Bardi. SESC Pompéia, São Paulo, 1987.

Alterity and identity

Those two words have been very much used lately, made famous by post-structuralist usage, and I will take them once more to analyze the difference between Frampton's theory and a truly hybrid or amphibious architecture. While Frampton's Critical Regionalism departs from the gradual construction of an identity to be later applied everywhere, the hybrid or amphibious strategy deals much more with alterity. Instead of developing a signature style or a anchored identity, hybrid architecture answers the demands and needs of the context, responding to this alterity rather than imposing its own identity. Frampton asserts that the reinterpretation of vernacular elements inserted into high-architecture is one of the major strategies of critical regionalism. But what about the opposite strategy: the application of elements derived from high-architecture into vernacular or low-architecture. Can his theory of critical regionalism encompass this move? I don't think so, since Frampton's idea is more concerned about horizontal exchanges (on the geographical / geopolitical surface) and allow no interaction on the vertical (between high and low manifestations in the same place) exchanges except mediated by the architect that would appropriate vernacular elements.

In the last few years we perceive the valorization of a different kind of architecture. Not that this approach is radically new, in fact it has been practiced for long, but the valorization or the arrival of this kind of architecture on the media is a recent phenomena. As another outcome of our metaphor, the architectural media is seen as the water surface. Only after your have anchored yourself with a lot of floating (or formalist) material, you can be seen and your work to be shown. Many architects

have been working under water for years, and their work never emerged, no matter how good their buildings were, they never became a brand or a type or a style. I recognize the importance of the architectural media, but would advocate for an architecture that are able to survive both above and under the line that defines it, the water line. Architects like Lina Bo Bardi have always done that. With enormous mobility, moving between the low manifestations of local culture and popular art to the high sites of publications and exhibitions, she shows an unexpected awareness for the surroundings. Such awareness convey a variety of responses that leads to buildings that are not restricted by one or another style, but instead are enriched by diversity and transformation. She also had a public persona that was not designed like her buildings and could not stand too much exposition and publicity, feeling the need to disappear, once in a while, under the invisible surface of the overexposed media. When she emerged back, the work seems re-energized with a different vibration, a different pulse.

With the experience of multiple displacements, from Milan to Sao Paulo to Salvador, to the Brazilian backlands, Bardi maintained a coherent path that is based in the use of architecture as a public and communal equipment. Always team-designing and team-working, Bardi influenced many generations of Brazilian architects, as well as stage designers, industrial designers and museum curators. Her work ranged from costumes to churches, from museums to furniture. One of her later designs, the Centro Cultural do SESC Pompéia, is an old industrial plant adapted to became a cultural and sports center. It is very fruitful to compare the SESC Pompéia designed in the early 80s with the MASP designed in the late 50s, since those two are her most publicized buildings. Both are in the city of São Paulo and, as in our metaphor, built above the water line, gave her a place on Latin American star-system of architectural publications and exhibitions. But looking at both we perceive the use of reinforced concrete as the core of her *paulista* identity, meanwhile the SESC shows the influence of her afro-*sertanejo*[13] knowledge. Coming back to a major commission in São Paulo, Brazilian financial and media center, Bardi brought with her the experience of Bahia. The SESC Pompéia is a cultural/sports facilities for the clerical employees of São Paulo, the majority of them immigrants from the backlands or the North-east

Lina Bo Bardi and Kenneth Frampton would then disagree in many issues. Bardi had a strong faith in the social side of architecture, quite optimistic, and worked all her life navigating between center and periphery. Working below the media line, she have produced few publicized buildings and even those few are inevitably the result of a return to the center. On her way back to the centers, she brought with her the scars, scratches, the marks left from their collision with another reality. Bardi is only one of hundreds of architects that worked in the opposite direction of critical regionalism. Instead of developing individual stylistic interpretations of culture to
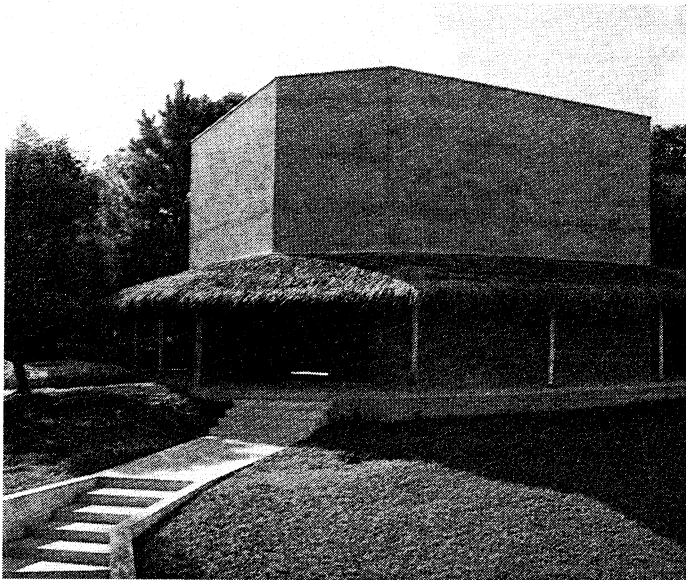

Fig. 6. Lina Bo Bardi, Chapel in Ibiuna, *São Paulo, 1981.*

be replicated, they preferred to move themselves, to sail through the dangerous oceans of the periphery. Diving deep into the local people and swimming high to the art establishment, they managed to move in between partnerships, collaborations, exchanges, influences and counter-influences that enriches much more than threatens their architecture. Amphibious or hybrid for choice, not for nature, they represent to me the best possible solution: the possibility of maneuvering between different systems, different regions, and different realms.

Can amphibious survive labels?

It is hard to know if once raised to the levels of visible exposure, architects like Bardi will not became themselves canonical. The very fact that I am writing about them and you are reading take them from the invisible depth up to the surface, where they may dry if overexposed or over-publicized. It will be in-

Fig. 7. Bardi, Installation at SESC Pompéia, 1990.

teresting to follow the result of some public exposures of Bo Bardi's work like the one at Columbia University in October 1999. But since what interests us is the dynamics between the many different realms, those and many other architects need to be shown and seen, especially for educational purposes in order for these dynamics to be understood. The need to enlarge the boundaries of architecture encompass both the need to re-connect to society as a whole and the need to emphasize a broader ethic as much as a broader aesthetic. Learning to maneuver or to sail or to swim in architectural ocean means basically to operate in a ethical way, responding to its social as well as formal and technological features. Frampton's major problem, to me, is to insist in a narrow definition of architecture. The risk of enlarging its definition are many, and goes from loosing control to loosing identity to loosing mobility. The challenge is similar to that of learning how to swim or learning how to operate in a foreign culture. Once the initial panic is overcome, the delight of maneuvering yourself in a new environment is indescribable. Architecture nowadays is much more about mobility than stability, and the hybrid or amphibious metaphor may encourage some to give it a try.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

[1]   Frampton, K. *Modern Architecture: a Critical History*, (New York; Oxford University Press, 1992): 327.

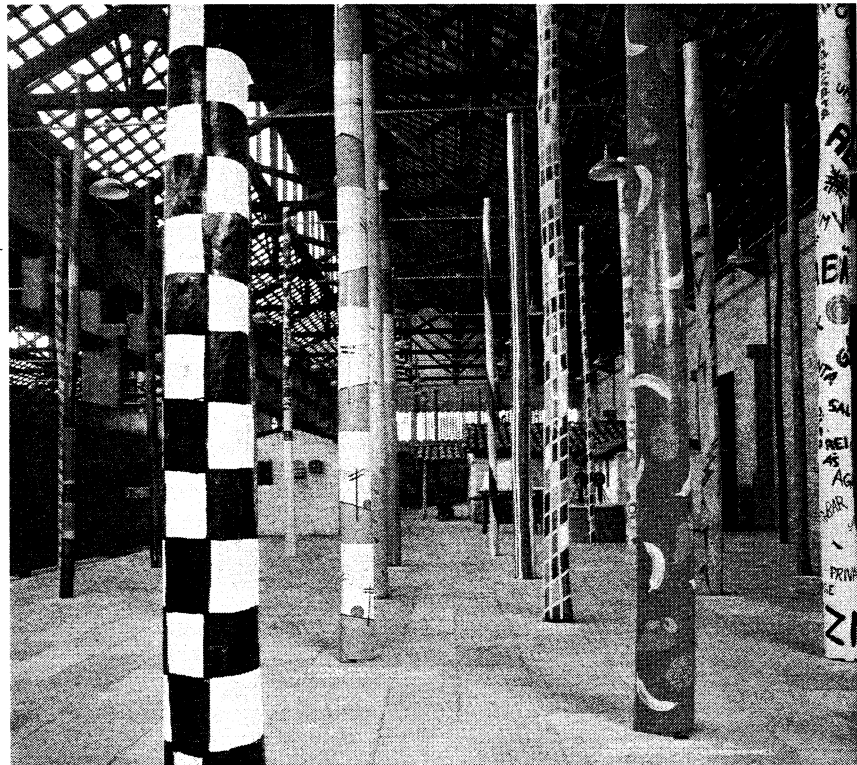[2]   Frampton, K. "Towards Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Ar-

chitecture of Resistance", in FOSTER, H., editor, *Postmodern Cultures*, London: Pluto Press, 1983.

[3]   Frampton, K. "Chapter 5: Critical Regionalism: Modern Architecture and Cultural Identity" *Modern Architecture: a Critical History*, (1992).

[4]   Frampton, K. "Modern Architecture and Critical Regionalism", RIBA Annual Discourse, December 1982, published at *Transactions 3*, (1983): 15-25.

[5]   Frampton, Op cit. (1983): 21.

[6]   Frampton, Op Cit. (1983): 16.

[7]   MEC (Ministerio da Educação e Cultura) building was designed by Lucio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer and Celso Leão in 1936, with Le Corbusier as a consultant. Inaugurated in 1942, became famous as the first high-raise corbusian-like building, with pilotis, brise-soleils, glazing facade and terrace roof ever built.

[8]   Bardi, Lina Bo. *Lina Bo Bardi*, São Paulo: Instituto Lina Bo e P.M. Bardi, 1994.

[9]   Frampton, Op Cit. (1992): 327.

[10]   Frampton, Op Cit. (1983): 20.

[11]   Ghirardo, Diane. *Architecture After Modernism*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1996.

[12]   Solá-morales, Ignasi. *Differences: topographies of contemporary architecture*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997.

[13]   Sertanejo are the ones from the sertão, from the Brazilian backlands, from the Brazilian interior.