

## Lessons from a Brazilian Experience: Architectural Dislocations between High and Popular Culture

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Fig. 1. House in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, 1950s.

In most countries, Modern Architecture has never been popular. This statement is among the most publicized reasons for the failure of modernism (BROLIN, 1976; NEWMAN, 1980; VENTURI, 1966). In Brazil in the 1950's, however, modernism was very popular. In fact, it lay at the core of the modern national identity and played a very important role in Brazilian culture of that time (SEGAWA, 1994, 1998; LARA, 1998). The 1950s in Brazil were a unique moment for the development of the nation's self-image. This was due not only to the success of its modern architecture abroad, but also due to its optimism, relative political and economic stability and the acceleration of the model of national-developmentalism (FAUSTO, 1998; SKIDMORE, 1999), especially in the second half of the decade. It is widely known that Brazilian architecture played an important role in the consolidation of the Modern Movement after World War II, as can be perceived by the hundreds of articles about it published in Europe and the U.S. between 1947 and 1957.

The Brazilian case becomes even more singular when we consider the traditional divide between modernism/high-art/institutional and commercial buildings on one hand, and traditional styles/popular culture/houses on the other (HUYSSEN, 1986; COLOMINA, 1996). This divide between a traditional place to live and a modernist place to work has been a trademark of North-American modern architecture (OCKMAN, 1996; SCOTT-BROWN, 1977), but not the case in Brazil. The fact that the Brazilian middle class of the 1950s adopted modernism as its desired and fashionable style is a very intriguing deviation, a phenomenon that deserves study and that contributes to a broader understanding of Brazilian modernism in general and to the rethinking of 20th century architecture in the Americas.

The vast majority of these Brazilian houses were not designed by architects, but nevertheless presented modernist elements re-used and re-designed. Built by the owners themselves with help of a contractor and unskilled workers, the houses show an ingenious adaptation and application of a modernist vocabulary. Most of the houses object of our analysis were built in lots of 12 x 30 meters (36 x 90 feet), with a facade usually only 9 or 8 meters wide only (around 30 feet). Despite the narrow lots, these houses present quite complex facade compositions, usually with one or two major volumes defined by different roof slopes and other minor elements that complete the facade.

Formal characteristics such as inverted roofs and concrete canopies were manifested in thousands of middle-class houses. Smaller elements such as thin steel columns, ceramic tiles and brise-soleils were even more common. Used to indicate modernity, this Popular Modernism (as I call it) achieved during the 1950's the status of fashionable popularity (LARA, 2001).

## THE ARCHITECTURAL DEBATE IN THE 1950S

Apart from this popular appropriation of modern architecture (which I will bring to the discussion later), Brazilian architects were discussing the last developments of modern architecture and the trends ahead. A certain anxiety is perceived in the editorial and analytical articles of those times, as if the world fame of Brazilian modernism had come too fast and generated a double task as a consequence. On one hand there are new and stronger demands for the solution of urban and housing problems of the country. On the other hand there is the need to keep the pace of international recognition with exuberant buildings. While most architects in Brazil were seriously working towards both goals, it is clear that they were being forced to choose between fulfilling one of the two different expectations.

In 1953 a harsh debate would spark between the Swiss critic and sculptor Marx Bill and the Brazilians galvanized around Lucio Costa, very much about this gap between social/local and formal/international orientation. Bill visited the country and wrote a negative article blaming the Brazilians for excessive expressionism and for lacking the true demands behind modern architecture: industrialization and mass production to serve new clients. Costa replied by stating that in three days the Swiss architect/sculptor had pretended to fully understand the nation and its architecture.

Adding to those debatable issues was the necessity of contextualizing Brazilian Modern Architecture into the world-wide panorama of late modernism. If the Brazilians themselves had difficulties finding their niche in the complex scenario of influences and counter-influences, the Europeans also had difficulty understanding and accepting the grandeur of such peripheral architectural manifestation. An analysis of Eduardo Guimaraes editorials in *Arquitetura e Engenharia* can provide many clues about the architectural debate of the 1950s in Brazil.

Already in the first editorial in January 1952, Guimaraes affirms the importance of architecture among the arts of those times, and promises to remain alert for the improvement and revision of the architecture practice (GUIMARAES in *A&E*, 1-1952). At that time, Kubitschek was beginning his term as Governor of Minas Gerais and Guimaraes expresses his hopes that his term in office would reinforce Minas Gerais as Brazilian architectural avant-garde. Later in the same year of 1952, Guimaraes acknowledged that Brazilian architecture was still among the leading forces in the world, but isolationism, self-sufficiency, expressionism and what he called "form-creation fever" was already undermining the excellence of Brazilian architecture. Two years later, in May 1954, Guimaraes was arguing that European and North-American critics were becoming indifferent to Brazilian modernism and portraying it as a late offspring of Le Corbusier. He defended what he saw as the original

Brazilian contribution to modern architecture: ingenuity, imagination, plasticity and lightness. He saw these<sup>1</sup> being used in more popular-oriented programs, improving its "human and social component". Social oriented programs were the topic of his editorial again in September 1954, when he argued for the "inclusion of the common men as the architect's client".

While most architects criticized such popular appropriation and did not perceive the power of modernist vocabulary being adopted by the middle class, Joao Batista Vilanova Artigas manifested a different evaluation. Artigas was an architect in Sao Paulo, professor at USP, social activist and leader of the so-called *Paulista School* identified with 1960s brutalism. In a speech for the graduates of 1955, published in a collection of his writings (as well as in XAVIER, 1987), he said that: we see, on the other hand that the new architectural expressions of Brazil are being accepted by the masses, even when it is presented on its most audacious forms. We may even say that Brazilian people opens a trust credit to architects... and on the very vulgarization of certain achievements of Brazilian modern architecture we shall see a reflect of a general sympathy towards our renovation efforts and solutions it proposes. There are those who sees the fast acceptance and reproduction of certain building forms without sufficient critical assimilation as a symptom of decay. The democratization of architecture's achievements must be seen as a burning desire, from the masses, for acquiring a new architectural language.<sup>2</sup> (ARTIGAS, 1986)

## BETWEEN POPULAR AND HIGH ARCHITECTURE

The relationship between architecture and popular culture is one of the main challenges of contemporary architectural theory. Defined by the dichotomy of high versus popular architecture, a gap is perceived between both camps. As stated by Andreas Huyssen "modernity has always had a volatile relationship between high art and mass culture," and he later develops the idea that the avant-garde had tried a alternate relationship (HUYSSSEN, 1986). Another important aspect of the high / popular dichotomy is the exchange of ideas and trends between the two poles. Kenneth Frampton's famous essay on Critical Regionalism, for instance, emphasizes one direction of the movement, that of architects consciously taking elements of vernacular built environment (FRAMPTON, 1992). However, lay people's appropriation of high architecture has not received much attention, being perceived as unworthy of architectural scholarship.

But it is also widely known that modernism, especially in the U.S., has emphasized the "high" manifestations, with little popular appropriation. As the post-modern advocates have stated from the beginning, modernism has never been popular. One of the main ideas behind this paper is that in Brazil the high-popular equation in architecture has been different due to

the phenomenon of Popular Modernism. The discussion of how popular it has been is the topic of this section. Could modernism become vernacular? That is one of the main questions addressed by this paper and as will be discussed later, the permanence of some spatial qualities and uses rooted in the 18th century provides the vernacular component of those 1950's houses.

In order to place Popular Modernism in relation to this high/low paradox in Brazil I need to frame how the issue was being discussed there at that time. Since the *Semana de Arte Moderna*<sup>3</sup> in 1922, Brazilian intellectuals were paying close attention to issues of popular culture and the dialogue between high and low art manifestations. The debates were restricted to an elite, as was the consumption of cultural goods at that time. According to Renato Ortiz, the characterization of the popular in Brazilian culture only happens after the formation of a consumer market for cultural goods, well into the 1950s. Ortiz reminds us that there was no middle class around the 1930s to sustain the development of a "Brazilian culture" (ORTIZ, 1985: 63). That statement is sustained by Nestor Garcia Canclini's thesis that Latin America in general and Brazil in particular had an exuberant modernism with deficient modernization for only a tiny part of the population was immersed in real modernity (GARCIA CANCLINI, 1995). To problematize Garcia Canclini's thesis is of crucial importance to rethink 20th century architecture in the Americas. Both Garcia Canclini and Ortiz acknowledged that a truly popular art would only exist when reaching a popular audience. The *modernistas* (modernists) of the 1920s and 30s had the common people in mind and it is often present in their work of art, be it literature, painting or music. But the audience of those works of art was still the illustrated elite, and it would only change with the improvements of mass media and the rise of the middle class in the 1950s. In these terms, the cultural production of the early modernists in Brazil was very much one-directional, with artists deriving their inspiration from the popular realm. On the other hand, lay people were not being influenced by high art manifestations. The lower classes were present in the books and in the paintings but they never saw or read such works.

Even in the 1950s, two of the major Brazilian successes, music and cinema, suffered from the same problem of not achieving a larger audience. The world-wide acclaimed *bossa-nova*, so famous for blending North-American jazz with Brazilian samba, has never been a hit at the slums where the samba was born. A ultimate urban upper class phenomenon, *bossa-nova* was produced and consumed by a upper middle class in the southern neighborhoods in Rio and spread to other wealthier young audiences in Brazilian major cities. While Antonio Carlos Jobim is known all around the world for having composed "Garota de Ipanema" (Girl from Ipanema) among other hits, in Brazil he never sold as many albums as Roberto Carlos<sup>4</sup> or *Sertanejos* (Brazilian country music). The movie movement known as *cinema-novo* has enjoyed an even narrower audience.

Although the manifesto-thematic of the film directors was based on bringing the "people" to the big screen, a great majority of Brazilians had never watched a *cinema-novo* movie. As reminded by Randall Johnson, the masses were on the screen but not in the audience of *cinema-novo* (JOHNSON & STAM, 1982: 37).

Intellectuals at that time acknowledged that the masses were in the lyrics, paintings and screen but not on the audience. In architecture, the preoccupation with the masses was addressed by the need for low-income housing. In those terms, the issue of housing vis-a-vis government investment was the major concern of architects. The 1950s saw a growing number of apartment buildings being designed and built, commissioned by public or private institutions. Moreover, some architects were unsatisfied with designing for the lower classes, claiming for more participation and power to be granted to the users (BONDUKI, 1998:73).

But the issue of how to achieve a true popular architecture would again be raised by Joao Vilanova Artigas. According to Artigas, "as long as the connection between architects and the popular masses is not established, not organized, and as long as the work of architects do not achieve the honor of being discussed in the farms and industries, there will be no popular architecture<sup>5</sup>" (ARTIGAS, apud XAVIER, 1987: 142).

From Artigas' statement I think a few interesting points can be raised. It is clear that he is worried about involving the masses in the discussion of architecture, giving voice for the actual users of the spaces designed by architects. But while his progressive ideas call for including industry and agricultural workers as not only clients but discussants of architecture, he also insists in the indispensability of "the architect."

One question follows. How much were the arts in touch with Brazilian reality in the 1950s? Artigas was an exception in both his acknowledgement of Popular Modernism as a compliment and his preoccupations with the masses.

If Brazilian intellectuals and artists were talking about the popular masses, "brazilianess", and national identity, how does this relationship between high and low operates? The discussion of popular culture at that time was strongly tied to the political moment, so much that for Carlos Estevan, popular culture could only exist related to conscious revolutionary objectives (ESTEVAN, 1963). By Estevan's standards, Popular Modernism could not be considered popular culture since it does not display revolutionary conscience, being therefore 'alienated'.

One of the benefits of the analysis of Popular Modernism is that it does not fit the general pattern of high/low dichotomy, adding to and challenging this debate. Many differences place the Popular Modernism as an exception, but an exception that may

prove the rule. When comparing such Popular Modernism with other art manifestations of 1950s Brazil, I am tempted to claim that it was a unique phenomenon that inverted some of the traditional relationships between high and low.

The medium is derived from high architecture, being it the elements: inverted roofs, *brise-soleils*, thin metallic columns, ceramic tiles, and canopies. The agents are definitely popular or “low” since there are no architects designing those houses, although I was able to find a few other professionals involved with the design and construction of the houses. But unlike in other encounters between high and low, the size and nature of the audience is very different, since thousands of modernist facades can be found in every neighborhood occupied around the 1950s. The fact that everyone can see those facades, being as public as any other urban architectural object, multiplies the audience even more. Not only were the owners involved in the process as producers, but the whole city population, who passed by those houses daily, was forcibly involved as receiver of the message, in a manner close to what Walter Benjamin explained as “distracted perception”.

In summary, with a medium derived from high architecture and manipulated by “low” agents, achieving a broad audience, Popular Modernism occurs in the exact opposite direction of the traditional high/low relationship. The traditional meeting between high and low in architectural historiography concerns a “high” agent (the architect) deriving his vocabulary from some popular or “low” built environment and rearranging it in a sophisticated building for a small audience.

In these terms, the phenomenon of Popular Modernism is unique in providing us a counter-example that is a successful bridge between high art and the masses, for incorporating elements of a sophisticated and highly acclaimed architecture and spreading it to a significant part of the Brazilian population. But instead of perceiving it as a useful bridge or a tool for touching the masses or a successful outcome of Brazilian modernism, architects saw it as degeneration and worthless imitation or kitsch.

The reason for that dismissal might be that no architect was involved in the design and construction of those houses, therefore considering it as falling outside the realm of architecture worth studying. Due to the degree of novelty and transformation, such houses were not perceived as vernacular either. Or following Garcia Canclini, the problem is that while high art values uniqueness, popular culture values the collective, the repetition. (GARCIA CANCLINI, 1995: 173). Dinah Guimaraes and Lauro Cavalcanti’s book describing some of those houses as “kitsch” architecture might fit into that definition for they choose to analyze the more picturesque and exotic houses, leaving behind the great majority of Popular Modernist ones. But even when perceived as a hybrid, a blend of high and popular architecture, these Popular Modernist



Fig. 2. House in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, 1950s.

houses are not easily defined since they are also a hybrid between modernist and traditional architecture.

#### BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AND MODERN ARCHITECTURE

Right in the beginning of his *Hybrid Cultures*, Garcia Canclini coined a definition that might best explain the relationship between the traditional and the modern in the investigation of Popular Modernism. According to him, “in Latin America, traditions have not yet gone and modernity has not yet arrived” (GARCIA CANCLINI, 1995: 1). He was speaking here of the present (early 1990s), but I don’t think it would be a problem to extend that to the past, especially to the 1950s in Brazil.

When analyzing the Popular Modernist houses, I came to the conclusion that they are in fact impure exemplars, a crossbreed of traditional and modern issues. At the level of the facades, elements of modernist vocabulary are often combined in a more traditional manner. The windows for example tend to have medium sizes, much like the more traditional houses, but are organized asymmetrically much like the more modernist buildings. In terms of roof and overall volume, while the volume tends to be squared when viewed from the street (a modernist feature), it usually hides a more traditional ceramic tiled roof.

In the interior, the modern/tradition hybridization is even more evident, for the majority of the houses visited had a very traditional spatial layout but modernist elements such as ceramic fragments in the floors. And the analysis of the interiors also revealed a tendency towards a more modernist layout on the wealthier/larger houses, indicating a transition in the interior that might have happened late in relation to the façade transformations.

But the discussion of to what extent those houses are modern or traditional brings me to question of what is actually tradition

and modernity. If a “modern” identity was being formed in Brazil, and architecture was very much part of this construction, what about the “traditional” identity that preceded it? The houses seen here as more traditional ones are, in terms of their facades, a consequence of a French neo-classical movement that swapped Brazil in the 19th century. Decorated facades with romantic styles, pitched roofs, side *varandas* and arched windows are all elements derived from the Beaux-Art vocabulary, brought to Brazil by the Portuguese court in 1808.

If there is a tradition to rely upon it is certainly manifested in the plan of those houses. Different from the more fashionable cycles of the facades, the plans of those houses have been evolving from the Portuguese colonial to the gold-rush 18th century buildings and all the way into the urbanization early 20th century, as explained by Nestor Goulart Reis (1978) and Fernando Novaes (1997).

Therefore, this dichotomy between the novelty of the facades and the conservatism of the interior organization is not something new to domestic architecture in Brazil. Nevertheless, many scholars have already explored this theme of importing foreign trends into Brazilian culture. Roberto Schwarz for instance has investigated the recurrent importation of those “out of place ideas”, to the extent that for him it becomes a tradition (SCHWARZ, 1992). For him, it is the dislocation of foreign ideas in the Brazilian reality that defines most of the national movements. In a similar vein was also the modernist *antropofagia* or “cannibalism” manifesto of the late 1920s, according to which Brazilian culture was defined by the act of eating foreign trends to be digested into something else. This cultural cannibalism persists even today with the upper classes importing the image of North American suburban homes (with pitched roofs and wooden finishing) to their tropical gated communities.

But if there is a “tradition of the new” or better, a “tradition of importing ideas”, the Brazilian Modern Movement in architecture also had a different attitude towards tradition since its beginning. Lúcio Costa, the very same man that was responsible for introducing modernist curricular changes at the *Escola Nacional de Belas Artes* in 1930, was also one of the leading forces behind the creation of the SPHAN (office of preservation) in 1937. Working on both fronts, the past and the future of architecture, Costa and others were able to weave together an intellectual discourse that connected the Brazilian modernism with the 18th century baroque of Minas Gerais. If on the European modernist avant-garde the past was used as an alterity, as something to be opposed to, the Brazilian case is singular for the use of the past in the construction of identity (LARA, 1998). It should be noted that it is not every past, but a carefully designed and chosen myth of origin. However, the use of memory as an identity rather than an alterity, allowed the modern project to solve many of the complex conflicts of the first decades of the 20th century. Ancient and modern are

integrated and while it proposes a continuation with an older past – baroque – it successfully denies the importance of the Beaux-art ideals of the 19th century.

As reminded by Adrian Gorelik, “they could not propose a *tabula rasa* since the problem was the *tabula rasa*, therefore the historic jump went straight to the myths of origin without mediation, to invent the past.”<sup>6</sup> (GORELIK, 1999: 67).

If the paradigmatic buildings of Brazilian modern architecture are the result of a combination of modern and baroque influences (FRAMPTON, 1992; SEGAWA, 1998), the houses that configure the Popular Modernism phenomenon are also representative of such paradox. In these terms they are even more modernist than the famous buildings of Niemeyer and others, specially if we look for the roots or the demands of modern architecture: new clients, new programs, new technology, and discomfort with traditional styles. The new clients are present since the idea of the middle class adopting modernist vocabulary is unique. The new technologies play a big role, as demonstrated by the use of ceramics, metallic columns, *brise soleils* and flatter roofs. The discomfort with traditional styles is certainly one of the main reasons behind the modernist facades. Probably the new programs are the only of the four major demands partially absent, since the plans don’t change much except in the wealthier houses.

Those houses fluctuate between tradition and modernity and also between high and popular manifestations. Rather than trying to anchor or fix the phenomenon of Popular Modernism in one half or another of those dichotomies, I should conclude this section with a discussion of to what extent this double root and hesitant outcome is a reflection of a broader duplicity, characteristic of Brazilian modernization.

When trying to conceptualize the phenomenon of Popular Modernism inside the broader framework of the Brazilian path of modernization, I relied on many authors who describe such modernization as ambiguous and double-faced (FAUSTO, 1998; BENEVIDES, 1979; ORTIZ, 1985). On one hand, there are progressive forces pushing ahead, thirsty for modernity and very much in favor of revolution and change. This project usually identified with emerging sectors of Brazilian society. More urban and more educated than average, they are not afraid of the new and have a more positive take on the transformations that are occurring since the late 19th century. In fact, it is clear from the debates of the first half of the 20th century that those progressive forces are displeased with the slow pace of change. When the developmental model initiated by Vargas and accelerated by Kubitschek collapses in the early 1960s, the ideological divide that emerged would see the progressive forces aligned with the left in favor of faster and more radical transformations (SKIDMORE, 1999; FAUSTO, 1998).

On the other hand, there is a more conservative set of forces pushing for a controlled modernization, worried about order and social hierarchy, suspicious of things new and preaching a slow evolution. Identified with the rural oligarchy and the old industrial owners, this group sees the process of modernization as inevitable, but tries to maintain its privileges by allowing only the transformation that interests them.

The Brazilian modernization had evolved between those two forces, sometimes slower and more controlled as during the first Vargas government (1930-45), sometimes flirting with social movements and labor unions as during the second Vargas government (1951-54), sometimes with accelerated economic growth as during the Kubitschek government (1955-60). But beneath all those fluctuations there is a tactic compromise for “order and progress” as it is written in the national flag. Such modernization process should bring progress and transformation, but in a controlled manner so as not to threaten the social order. Perceived in slightly different terms by different scholars and authors, this dual modernization is labeled “incomplete” by Garcia Canclini and “conservative” by Renato Ortiz (1985) and Boris Fausto (1998). It is also important to point out that there was not one single process of modernization but many, overlapping and or distancing themselves according to the context and the transformations in course.

It is inevitable that the middle class houses organized here around the theme of Popular Modernism would carry the same split personality. The urban emerging middle class that was responsible for building the majority of the houses that are object of this study should identify more clearly with the progressive side of the dual modernization. But that does not seem to be absolutely true, and the conservative interior betrays their modern image, revealing their double roots and double standards. Later in the 1960s, when the ideological camps of right and left collided over the need for more or less transformations, the same middle class that displayed their modern facades in the 1950s, strongly supported the 1964 coup and military authoritarian regime that followed.

To help frame my conclusions I will report on an encounter that happened Brazil. When in 1955 Walter Gropius visited Niemeyer's own house at Canoas (completed the previous year) he commented that the house was truly beautiful but could not be mass-produced. Gropius comments echoed for decades among Brazilian architects who saw his remarks as bitter criticism. Since little pre-fabrication was being used in Brazil, the country could not figure among the leading design nations despite the beautiful forms of its buildings.

What is interesting to perceive from this study of Popular Modernism is a striking gap between production and re-production. While Niemeyer's house could not be mass-produced as Gropius thought every house should be, its aesthetic was at that very same moment being re-produced in hundreds

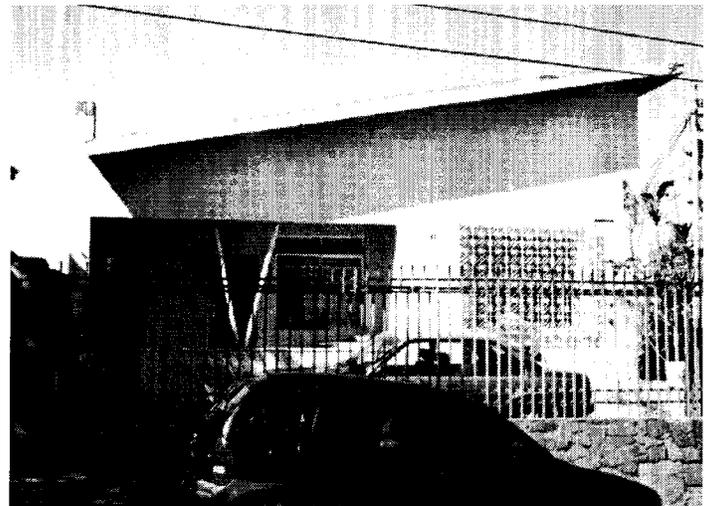


Fig. 3. House in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. 1950s.

of thousands of middle class houses. Nevertheless, it is still debatable whether Gropius designs had actually disseminated to the extent he envisioned, or how could the mass-production process negotiate so carefully with traditional spatiality for instance. I would conclude this section with the statement that escaping the modernist obsession with production, Brazilian modernism was massively re-produced, with processes and techniques adapted to the local reality. With the blending together of such contradictory trends, the Brazilian middle class may have built a unique kind of modernism with a post-modern attitude.

The phenomenon of Popular Modernism is, therefore, as much a result of this dual-faced modernization as it is a result of the high/popular and the modern/traditional dualities. Such double roots would be mainly manifested in the overlapping of a modernist façade hiding a conservative plan, but it also unfolds into a discussion of universality versus particularity or center versus periphery, therefore problematizing the whole path of 20th century architecture in the Americas.

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## NOTES

- <sup>2</sup> The original Portuguese quotation of Artigas follows: "vemos, por outro lado que as expressões novas da arquitetura no Brasil vem sendo aceitas pelo povo, mesmo quando se apresenta em suas formas mais audaciosas. Podemos mesmo dizer que o povo brasileiro abre um crédito de confiança aos arquitetos". E continua afirmando que: "na própria vulgarização de certas conquistas da arquitetura brasileira devemos ver o reflexo da simpatia geral pelo esforço renovador e pelas soluções que ela propoe. Há os que encaram a rápida aceitação e reprodução de certas formas construtivas sem suficiente assimilação crítica ou elaboração criadora, como um sintoma de decadência. A democratização das conquistas da arquitetura deve ser encarada como o desejo ardente, por parte do povo, da aquisição de uma linguagem nova no campo da arquitetura" (ARTIGAS, 1956).
- <sup>3</sup> *Semana de Arte Moderna*, a week of art exhibitions, poetry and manifestoes declamation in Sao Paulo, 1922, that is considered to be the starting point of Brazilian modernism.
- <sup>4</sup> Roberto Carlos started in the early 1960s with the *Jovem Guarda* (young-guard) movement and became the "king" of romantic music in the 1970s.
- <sup>5</sup> The Portuguese original quotation of Artigas follows: "enquanto a ligação entre os arquitetos e as massas populares não se estabelecer, não se organizar, enquanto a obra dos arquitetos não tiver a suma glória de ser discutida nas fabricas e nas fazendas, não haverá arquitetura popular."
- <sup>6</sup> The Portuguese actual quotation follows: não podia se propor uma tabula rasa porque o problema era a tabula rasa, por isso o salto histórico, sem mediações, endereçado aos mitos de origem para inventar um passado (GORELIK, 1999: 67).