

Niemeyer

In the academic spotlight

Studies analyze
the work of
Brasilia's creator

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The apparent simplicity of the work of Oscar Niemeyer (1907–2012) obscures his hard work and many reflections on architecture. Understanding his career requires a practiced eye and profound analysis. To account for this complexity, which the master liked to downplay, many researchers have tried very hard to understand how Niemeyer's highly personal universe worked. The result of these efforts led to a series of studies by academics who dedicated themselves to contextualizing the curves and arches in the history of architecture. They concluded that few architects have changed the syntax of the profession as much as Oscar Niemeyer. Pesquisa FAPESP brings together some of the most representative works on the master.

This is a task the architect himself left to his colleagues. "When I give a lecture, I start by saying that I don't want to influence anyone. I list my works, the problems I encountered, how I proceed with the architecture and what I do. The rest is up to them," he said. The universities got the message. One of the most prolific scholars of the master is Roberto Segre, a professor at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ) and author of, among other studies, *Paradojas estéticas de um Niemeyer definitivo* (Aesthetic Paradoxes of a Definitive Niemeyer) (2008). "He brings together all of Le Corbusier's principles of structural logic, the importance of nature and landscape, and the significance of history



and tradition, which are complemented by the rationality needed to solve the architectural problems of the work. After studying the terrain, the cost, the materials and the relationship with the urban or natural setting, an idea arises, the final innovative proposal that merges intuition and rationality,” writes Segre. “He reinvented modern architecture.”

Professor Julio Katinsky of the University of São Paulo School of Architecture and City Planning (FAU-USP) and author of *Caminhos do desejo: desenhos de Oscar Niemeyer na FAU-USP (Paths of Desire: Oscar Niemeyer drawings at FAU-USP) (2007)* agrees that Niemeyer’s architectural career trajectory transcends the internal and external limitations of creating architecture. “There is no shortage of comments in Niemeyer’s essays on what is meant by beauty and the tasks imposed on contemporary architects. But, as we have said, we will never arrive at a valid and lasting definition for his concept of beauty,” noted the study *Técnica e arte na obra de Niemeyer (Technique and Art in the Work of Niemeyer) (2007)*. “Moreover, his work as an architect — along with revealing a remarkable consistency beginning with the works prior to Pampulha, but then showing us that a germ of the future architect was already in them — also reveals to us an architect that throughout his life, always knew how to creatively incorporate the innovations of his time. He adhered to a process of ongoing self-creation and renewal, from his first published works to those that are still coming out today.”



1 Columns of the Palácio do Planalto in Brasília

2 Oscar Niemeyer Cultural Center in Asturias, Spain

3 Copan Building, downtown São Paulo



The theme of recurrence also drew the attention of Edson Mahfuz, a professor at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) and author of *O clássico, o poético e o erótico: método, contexto e programa na obra de Oscar Niemeyer (The Classic, the Poetic and the Erotic: Method, Context and Program in the Work of Oscar Niemeyer) (2011)*. In the essay “Cinco razões para olhar com atenção as obras de Oscar Niemeyer (Five Reasons to Look Carefully at the Works of Oscar Niemeyer),” Mahfuz analyzes the principal features of the architecture of Brasília’s creator. “One of the most striking characteristics of Niemeyer’s work, what sets it apart from the work of 99% of other architects, is that it has a strong sense of formal identity. This quality comes from the presence of clear formal structures based on the organization of his designs, the use of basic forms in configuring their constituent elements and the fact that the number of elements in his designs is always limited,” writes Mahfuz. “These characteristics define a highly plastic work, easy to understand and remember — and therefore having highly symbolic power — which never yielded to the temptation to make extravagant designs in an era classified by some as Neo-Baroque,” he says.

Revisiting his works is one of Niemeyer’s virtues, according to Mahfuz. “Although there is much talk of the originality of Oscar Niemeyer’s ideas, a close examination of his work is enough to show that its characteristic feature is recurrence, reusing his own solutions

or those of other architects, as was the case with the work of Le Corbusier early in his career. Like any self-respecting artist, Niemeyer was slowly developing his own way of solving architectural problems, expanding his repertoire, adapting and recycling solutions that had already been used,” says Mahfuz. “The obsession with originality implies that constant innovation is expected from Niemeyer’s architecture, and at all levels. But because of its evolutionary nature, his work is predictable and easily recognizable. Far from being a defect, this seems to me to be one of its virtues. Although he said his goal was to surprise, an encounter with most of his complexes conveys the comforting feeling of a reunion with something already known,” Mahfuz observes.

This feeling born of architectural forms was examined in another essay by Lauro Cavalcanti, an anthropologist at the Rio de Janeiro State University (UERJ), which broke new ground by analyzing Niemeyer’s designs through a prism that combined architecture, aesthetics and society, as in *A doce revolução de Oscar Niemeyer* (The Sweet Revolution of Oscar Niemeyer) (2007). “All architects in their mature phase revisit some of their main themes. Niemeyer does this with domes, architectural promenades and structural lightness. But he always surprises with new solutions that are able to recreate languages, in which the solution is unique and rare. There is a coherence to the diversity of the various phases, combining structure and architecture in favor of form,” he says.

This coherence led Carlos Dias Comas, a professor at UFRGS, to analyze in *O direito à diferença* (The Right to be Different) (2007) how the architect used foundations, ceilings, curves, and open spaces. These examples are illustrative of how Niemeyer expanded the vocabulary and syntax of modern architecture. “For Niemeyer, the curve is not episodic or sporadic, it does not unite the ephemeral or casual nature of the compartmentalization in contention with the permanence of the orthogonal structure. The curve may dispense with the straight, overpower it, balance it, without so much as appearing. Aside from valuing extreme opposites as equal, the ambivalence is also ambiguous. The interstices of the completely curved design and the totally straight design command one’s attention,” he says. The creative genius of assumptions and solutions, however, does not always remain free from criticism. “By 1970, Brasília had become the symbol of everything that seemed wrong with modern architecture, condemned



One of the characteristics that distinguishes Niemeyer’s work, setting it apart from the work of 99% of other architects, is its strong formal identity

as elitist, frivolous, superficial, formalistic and inhumane like the author of its palaces,” he writes. “The recovery of his prestige began in 1990, at the same time as, to some extent, the recovery of modern architecture itself and the understanding of polyphony, where there is room for asceticism and formal diversification,” says Comas.

To Cêça Guimaraens, a professor in UFRJ’s School of Architecture and City Planning, the polyphony is remarkable, but it was repeated more than was desirable in Niemeyer’s architectural gestures in the final decades of his life. “We must recognize that, beginning with the disconcerting volumes of the Integrated Centers of Popular Education (Cieps), the architect continued to redesign his own unusual forms,” he asserts in *Sobre o novo em Niemeyer* (On the New in Niemeyer) (2007).

Sylvia Ficher, a professor at the University of Brasília (UNB) and author of *Guia de obras de Oscar Niemeyer: Brasília 50 anos* (Guide to the Works of Oscar Niemeyer: Brasília 50 years) (2010), also questioned the later designs, many of which she sees as “useless or oversized plans.” Neither does she accept the freedom given to Niemeyer to intervene in a landmark area of Brasília “with questionable results.” “In general, an architect intervenes in the work of another. In this case, he is intervening in his own work and the effect is negative. But how can we be certain that, in the future, Brasília will not resent having so many of his works?” she asks, already knowing, to some extent, the answer. ■

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