

## Very rare and banal flower: Sergio Bernardes and the house of Lota de Macedo Soares <sup>1</sup>

*Hidden, oh hidden  
in the high fog  
the house we live in*

*Elizabeth Bishop  
“Song for the Rainy Season”, 1955*

When projects Lota de Macedo Soares's house at Fazenda Samambaia, in a mountainous region in Petrópolis, Sergio Bernardes is a newly graduated architect whose production is beginning to gain international prominence. At a time dominated by reinforced concrete his interest in the metal structure secured him a place in the first edition dedicated to Brazil by the prestigious French magazine *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*<sup>2</sup>. Lota's house establishes a defining moment in the architect's professional career. In a sense, the Pavilions of CSN (São Paulo, 1954), Brussels (1958) and São Cristóvão (Rio de Janeiro, 1957-8), Paraíba Cultural Space (João Pessoa, 1979-83), and even the Tropical Hotel in Manaus (1963), can be considered developments of an investigation that begins to take shape in Lota's house. This is a remarkable house also for being confused with the love relationship between two rare women: Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1972) and Maria Carlota (Lota) Costallat de Macedo Soares (1910-1967)<sup>3</sup>.

Bishop went through profound transformations in Brazil, where she lived for nearly two decades. Her writings – awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1956 and were largely produced in her home studio – alternate fascination and strangeness with the local culture. The energetic Lota circumvented her lack of technical training by giving herself viscerally to works of great complexity - from the construction of her own house at the top of Serra dos Órgãos to the transformation of a landfill into a 1.2 million m<sup>2</sup> park on the edge of the Bay of Guanabara

The approach between the two women begins shortly after the American poet landed in Brazil in 1951<sup>4</sup>. The house is beginning to be constructed on top of Lota's recently newly crowded farm frequented by friends such as future Governor Carlos Lacerda, architect Carlos Leão (author of the project for Lota's first house in Samambaia) and

<sup>1</sup> This article is based in the author's Doctoral Thesis (“Cutting Threads: Design and Product, Architecture and Design in Rio de Janeiro (1950-70)”, Department of History, PUC-Rio, 2008), and had a first published version in the architecture.critical section of the vitruvius website. The title is taken from Carmen L. Oliveira's book (Rare and Banal Flowers: The Story of Lota de Macedo Soares and Elizabeth Bishop. Rio de Janeiro, Rocco, 1996), which in turn corresponds to the title of a drawing by Carlos Leão in which Lota is represented as a flower.

<sup>2</sup> See the not executed project for Teresópolis Country Club, published in *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, 13/14, September 1947.

<sup>3</sup> See Oliveira, Carmen L. Op. Cit. and Walnut, Nadia. Inventions of yourself in love stories. Lota and Bishop. Rio de Janeiro: Apicuri, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> See, in particular, Brazil, Mexico City: Life, 1962, “On the Railroad named Delight” in: *New York Times Magazine*, March 7, 1965, and Bishop, Elizabeth. An art. The letters of Elizabeth Bishop. São Paulo: Company of Letters, 1995

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Flor rara e banalíssima: Sergio Bernardes e a casa de Lota de Macedo Soares

the North American dancer Mary Morse (her partner at time). It took five years to complete the construction. It was inconclusive, therefore, when the house received a prize at the II São Paulo Biennial, in 1954<sup>5</sup>. Among the three residential projects presented by Sergio Bernardes<sup>6</sup> at the time, Lota's house stood out the jury less for its eventual photogeny than for its more properly projectual attributes. Even though the judging committee had Michel Aertsens' images for appreciation, already in circulation in Brazilian and European magazines, the evaluation process at that time was focused on architectural drawings - plan and section, basically (Figure 1).

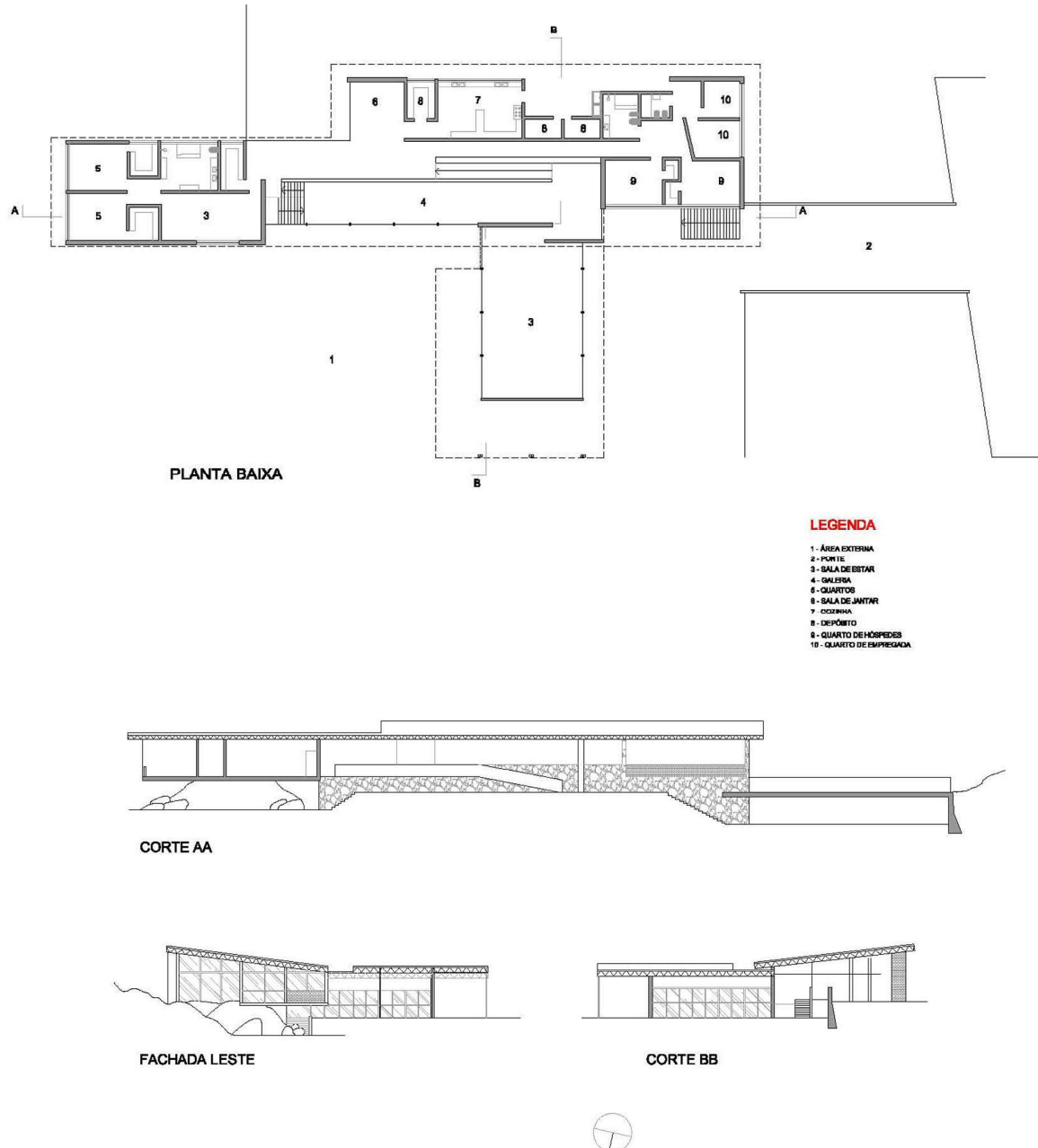


FIGURE 1- Plans and sections of Casa Lota, 1954.

Source: Bernardes' Architecture Memory Project. Fonte: <<http://www.bernardesarq.com.br/memoria/lota-macedo-soares/#group-6>>, acesso em 24 de julho de 2019.

<sup>5</sup> The jury of the Walter Gropius Award, Jose Lluís Sert, Alvar Aalto, Ernesto Rogers, Oswaldo Arthur Bratke, Afonso Eduardo Reidy and Lourival Gomes Machado.

<sup>6</sup> The other projects presented were the Paulo Sampaio Residences in Itaipava and Jadir de Souza in Rio de Janeiro.

It's looking at the floor plan that in fact, we can be properly introduced to the project. The core is founded, in different versions, in an expressive set of modern Brazilian houses - from Lucio Costa to Vilanova Artigas - gives way to a non-centered and non-hierarchical spatiality that unfolds simultaneously in several directions. It is noteworthy, from the outset, the east-west axis where the circulation develops - the ramp and its extensions. And no wonder this becomes the primary element of the project, innervating all the spaces with which it communicates. In contrast to the containment of both ends of the house, the ramp calls for a continuous crossing action. Not only does it confer simultaneous enjoyment of the two levels in which the residential program is organized (social at the bottom; intimate areas and service areas at the top), but it also outlines the project's own strength line, which has been highlighted since its first version<sup>7</sup>. Where, not by chance, settles in the most unusual space of the house: an extensive longitudinal gallery open to the valley and ready to receive the owner's art collection, composed of works by Kurt Schwitters, Alexander Calder and others.

The organization expressed in the configuration of the spaces is contrary to the patriarchal big house that Lota has breathed since his childhood on Samambaia Farm<sup>8</sup>. The requirements of sectorization and individual intimacy typical of bourgeois domesticity are not dispensed. But the nucleation of employee and guest quarters indicates a willingness to review ingrained living habits in Lota's social circle. While the spatiality of the house is marked by a centripetal force that assumes here a transgressive accent, corresponding to the owner's unusual profile: a woman who embodies the Brazilian political, economic and cultural elite of that moment but faces her normative standards by publicly exposing her homosexuality and assume an unthinkable leadership degree for a woman in Brazil from the 1950s-1960s.<sup>9</sup>

The project is also distinguished by following a planar logic that is closer to the neoplastic poetics than to the Corbusierian aspect, then dominant in Rio's architecture. In plan, the project allows for a single subversion of orthogonal rigor: the oblique line that subtly separates guest and employee dependencies (both with two bedrooms, bathroom and hall). Moreover, five zones correspond to well-defined activities: gallery and circulation; kitchen and dinner; intimate ward; guest and employee dependencies. There is another living room arranged perpendicular to the main body.

It is hard to say how far this architecture would not eventually become entangled in the same formalist bias from which it seems to want to break free. Even though the problem of the genesis of form is thickened here, to the point of posing a question of rare degree of complexity to architectural practice in Brazil in the 1950s.

## Industrialization and Imagination

The construction of the house advances along with the industrialist policy of the second Vargas government, amid the effort to redefine the visual culture of the country through the successive operations launched in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro by the Ruptura and Frente groups, respectively. And just as, in parallel with the emergence

<sup>7</sup> Periodicals magazines of the time reveals at least two versions of the project. From one to the other, the changes are limited to the internal arrangement of the extreme bodies of the house and the angle of the wall that defines the main access.

<sup>8</sup> Samambaia Farm was acquired by the Macedo Soares family when Lota was 5 years old. The property included a large house that served as drovers in the eighteenth century, was restored in 1942 by Wladimir Alves de Souza and today houses the Samambaia Institute of Environmental Science and the Lotta Institute. See <http://institutolotta.org.br>. Accessed on 10/07/2019.

<sup>9</sup> In 1961, at the invitation of Governor Carlos Lacerda, Lota took over the difficult process that led to the current Flamengo Park. The group responsible for the project and chaired by Lota was composed mainly of men, all protagonists of Brazilian architecture and landscaping, such as Affonso Eduardo Reidy, Jorge Moreira, Roberto Burle Marx and Sergio Bernardes (exonerated after quarreling with Lota over the restaurant project). The whole process - still tense by the political upheaval that led to the military coup - would erode Lota's relationship with his mate, leading to a collapse that resulted in his suicide in 1967. See Nogueira, Nadia. Op.cit.

of the debates that would lead to the dissolution of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture, the unprecedented prestige gained by Brazilian architectural production is threatened by criticism triggered by the controversial statements by Swiss architect Max Bill <sup>10</sup>.

It is inevitable to think of Lota's house in its relationship with the wider artistic-cultural environment in which it participates: at the local level, in the context of the intensified political-economic debate that accompanies the country's industrialization process and the dispute that it widens between different artistic and architectural currents (figurative and abstract; Latin and Germanic); internationally, in the postwar context, amid the first signs of a critical review of modern architecture.

Interestingly, among other Brazilian houses with which it coincides temporally - such as Oscar Niemeyer's house of Canoas, Affonso Eduardo Reidy's Carmen Portinho Residence, or Rino Levi's Olivo Gomes Residence -, Lota's house is the only winner. Even though the award was intended for architects up to 35 years old<sup>11</sup>, it is nonetheless significant that Sergio Bernardes' house was awarded, even before it was completed, within the institutional framework of the São Paulo Biennial, and by a jury headed by Walter Gropius, in the same edition where he receives the Architecture Grand Prix from President Getúlio Vargas (Figure 2).



FIGURE 2- House of Lota Macedo Soares, s.d.

Source: Bernardes Memory Architecture Project, BERNARDES Documentary - Paulo Barros and Gustavo Gama Rodrigues (right), photo by Kykah Bernardes.

To understand the significance of such recognition, one must keep in mind the secular dominance of French artistic culture in the Brazilian art and architecture, to which Vargas himself contributed by enabling Le Corbusier to come to the country in 1936. It is worth remembering how much the option for the Corbusierian side would

<sup>10</sup> See Nobre, Ana Luiza. "Cutting wires: design and product, architecture and design in Rio de Janeiro (1950-70)", History Department, PUC-Rio, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> The equivalent foreign architect award was given to Paul Rudolph for his Cabana Club project.

eventually drown out the echoes of the Bauhausian strand introduced in Brazil in the 1920s by Gregori Warchavchik and Alexander Altberg. The coming of Bauhaus founder to receive himself an official distinction in the 1950s seems to indicate, therefore, a shift in perspective not coincidentally with the intensification of the penetration of the constructive postulates in Brazil. With the “Federation of Industries of São Paulo” award given to Max Bill in 1951, the I Biennial, after all, had legitimized concrete art in Brazil, providing institutional support for overcoming the production of nationalist themes that had been continually identified as modern, even if it remained stuck in traditional schemes of representation. The house prize designed by Sergio Bernardes, therefore, takes on particular significance in this context, since there was explicitly placed the need to overcome the resistances to abstraction by defending a constructive idea of art production that was harmonized with universalism through which concrete art was defined in the early 1950s.

If in the field of art and poetry since the end of the 1940s, some tactically related groups had been formed in Brazil, then in architecture it was an option if not solitary, certainly singular. One only has to peruse the residential section of the compendium of Brazilian architecture launched by Henrique Mindlin in 1956 to realize how much the Casa de Lota is independent from the architectural production that was then reigning in the country. And Bernardes’ surprising degree of autonomy in this house would soon be confirmed in two ephemeral exhibition spaces: the National Steel Company Pavilion at Ibirapuera Park (1954) and the Brazilian Pavilion at the Brussels International Exhibition (1958). Each in their own way, both radicalize operative modes previously tested at Lota’s house. Not only from the point of view of experimentation with the metallic structure, but also from the combination of rational and intuitive knowledge. Or industrial logic and vernacular knowledge.

In neither case is the pursuit of a correspondence with the logic of the industrial system presupposing the exclusive use of sophisticated techniques or prefabricated elements. On the contrary. The use of glass imported from Belgium at Lota’s house, for example, will not prevent the incorporation of elements, materials and / or building systems of popular roots hitherto little explored by Brazilian architects (Figure 3).



FIGURE 3- House of Lota Macedo Soares, s.d.

Source: Bernardes Memory Architecture Project, BERNARDES Documentary - Paulo Barros and Gustavo Gama Rodrigues (right), photo by Kykah Bernardes.

In fact, what draws the most attention in the architecture of this house is the nonliteral relationship with technique. Unliteral, unceremoniously, and one could almost say even shameless. The simultaneous use of thatch, brick, and pebble, for example, indicates sensitivity to local circumstances while ignoring any romantic regionalism. In instead of seeing the technique as a redemptive key - according to the positive belief in 'civilisation machiniste' somewhat shared by Le Corbusier and Lucio Costa - Sergio Bernardes chooses to invest in a kind of demystification of his statute, in favor of an improvisation that admits to being a constituent of the Brazilian cultural environment itself. Therefore, it does not appeal to the artifice used by Gregori Warchavchik to secure a modern look in his first houses in Sao Paulo, nor does it align politically with the mobilization of nationalist sentiments that would later culminate in the creation of the Popular Centers of Culture.

Far from being taken as an impediment, the local technical capacity becomes an opportunity for experimentation from which the architect seeks to extract income in favor of the project. This is particularly evident in the roofing, which is made of corrugated aluminum tiles supported on a delicate metal lattice. The solution is clearly inspired by the home of Charles and Ray Eames in Pacific Palisades, California (1949). But, in the face of the unavailability of industrialized material, Sergio Bernardes does not disregard doing manually: it is enough to resort to the iron rebar usually used in reinforced concrete structures and to bend them on the site itself, with local labor. This empirical way of solving design problems is repeated all the time and results in somewhat disparate hybridity of the same roof, where the intention of ensuring a permanent circulation of air leads to the overlapping of a straw slat on the aluminum tiles. The solution doesn't last long, but it shows how architecture, for Sergio Bernardes, necessarily involves taking a risk in a controlled way. Error, for him, opens possibilities. That is why he is not afraid to put together two apparently irreconcilable materials, from the point of view of the prevailing technical and developmental order. Although the perishable character of thatch shows an unexpected agreement with the very logic of programmed obsolescence implied in the industrial cycle of production and consumption.

Both in coverage and in free support the determination to highlight the different elements with which one works. The supports consist of an "I" profile in the longitudinal body, pairs of slender columns in the balcony of the transverse body and of larger diameter in the balance of the rooms, in the east of the house. The roof trusses are made of ½" rebar painted white and bars of ¼" x 1" painted black, so that it is possible, by decomposition, to grasp the whole process of building the house - either through their joints, either through the materials employed. One soon realizes, for example, that stone, brick, glass, straw, iron, and aluminum are equivalent in importance, without mixing or hiding. This is because, free from the hierarchical relations prescribed by classical architecture, the materials here are thought of in their relation to structure and in respect to their own nature (see the brick employed in the vines of the rocking body, for example, in relation to the stone used on the body sitting directly on the ground).

In this attempt to give intelligibility to the construction process as a whole can glimpse an approximation of the "New Brutalism", defined shortly before with the Hunstanton School (1949-54) of Peter and Alison Smithson. In testing the possibility of combining manual making with industrial logic, Sergio Bernardes's procedure does not fail to refer in turn to the very foundations of the Bauhausian program. Not so much in the sense of seeking to establish a productive relationship with industry. But to support even a residual moral issue that guarantees a degree of flexibility to the pro-

ject based on a close relationship between design, material and production process. Even if in the end nothing achieves precise definition - even modulation (defined by a 3x3 m mesh) can after all require absolute rigor when considering the rudimentary character of the local constructive culture. For the point is not to pursue a record of constructive excellence, if that presupposes masking local conditions and even the artifice inherent in making architecture. Ultimately, the design freedom that comes from the absence of building norms eventually resurfaces in every solution in which the architect's demonstrates his increasingly and unstoppable ingenuity.

Moreover, architecture seeks a productive - that is, transformative - relationship with the place where it rises: the valley's infinity, the rock's vertical massif, the continuous flow of the river, the rugged topography of the Órgãos' mountain range, the mist that passes. This house wants both a poetic construction and a transformative practice: landscape, body, habits, mentality; a "modern being", in the broadest and most modern sense of the term.

Although isolated on the top of the mountain, after all, the house does not want to be segregated from the world. Rather, it seeks to define itself as the place of a rare social and affective existence, sheltering also the most banal dimension of the cycle of life and death.

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