



Book Review: **Architecture as Civil Commitment: Lucio Costa's Modernist Project for Brazil**

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In the last decades, there has been an effort to decentralize the history of modern movement centered on Western countries and a few selected names. As necessary revisionism, studies have brought to light other names, questioning the canon, and enabling the emergence of other protagonists. Research such as that of the Italian architect Gaia Piccarolo (2020) calls attention to voices that have been shadowed over the years.

Architecture as Civil Commitment: Lucio Costa's Modernist Project for Brazil, has as the main theme the professional career of the Brazilian architect and urban designer Lucio Costa (1902-1998). The son of Brazilian parents, Costa was born in Toulon, France, and studied in England and Switzerland. In 1916, his family returned to Brazil, where Costa began his studies at the Escola Nacional de Belas Artes - ENBA (National School of Fine Arts) and graduated as an architect in 1924. The years preceding the starting point of the narrative built by Piccarolo are marked by a professional practice that reflects his training at ENBA, and the production of building projects in an eclectic-historicist style stands out until he becomes a defender of the principles of modernism.

The book has a clear time frame, which begins in 1930, with the appointment of Costa as director of ENBA and the mission to modernize the architecture course. And it goes through the architect's professional trajectory until the end of the 1970s. The focus of the narrative constructed seeks to situate his professional performance within the Brazilian government, as well as his consolidation as one of the main responsible for the introduction and diffusion of modernist ideas, both and in architecture and urban design.

As the title announces, Piccarolo focuses on Costa's political and ideological commitment to the Brazilian State, exploring several layers of his personality and career, often ambiguous and contradictory. One of the most remarkable qualities of the book is the construction of linear chronological order, contextualizing the key moments in the architect's career. This contextualization, necessary to understand the dimensions and impact of his decisions and projects, distinguish it from other publications. Despite a vast literature on the architect, most of them are only available in Portuguese¹, limiting their accessibility. This gap in the international literature is partially occupied by studies on Modernism in Brazil in general², or specifically on Brasília³, among numerous articles and

¹ COSTA, Lucio, **Lúcio Costa: sobre arquitetura**, Porto Alegre: Centro dos Estudantes Universitários de Arquitetura, 1962; COSTA, Lúcio, **Lucio Costa: registro de uma vivência**, São Paulo: Empresa das Artes, 1995; WISNIK, Guilherme; COSTA, Lúcio, **Lucio Costa**, São Paulo: Cosac & Naify Edições, 2001; NOBRE, Ana Luiza (Org.), **Um modo de ser moderno: Lúcio Costa e a crítica contemporânea**, São Paulo: Cosac & Naify, 2004; COSTA, Lúcio; NOBRE, Ana Luiza, **Lucio Costa**, Rio de Janeiro: Beco do Azougue Editorial, 2010.

² GOODWIN, Philip Lippincott, **Brazil Builds; architecture new and old, 1652-1942**, New York: The Museum of Modern Art MoMA, 1943; MINDLIN, Henrique E., **Modern architecture in Brazil**, New York: Reinhold Pub. Corp., 1956; EVENSON, Norma, **Two Brazilian capitals: architecture and urbanism in Rio De Janeiro and Brasília**, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973; EPSTEIN, David G., **Brasília, plan and reality: a study of planned and spontaneous urban development**, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973; WILLIAMS, Richard J., **Brazil: modern architectures in history**, London: Reaktion, 2009; SEGAWA, Hugo, **Architecture of Brazil, 1900-1990**, New York, NY: Springer, 2013.

³ EVENSON, Norma, **Two Brazilian capitals: architecture and urbanism in Rio De Janeiro and Brasília**, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973; EPSTEIN, David G., **Brasília, plan and reality: a study of planned and spontaneous urban development**, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973; HOLSTON, James, **The modernist city: an anthropological critique of Brasília**, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989; EL-DAHDAH, Fares, **Case: Lucio Costa: Brasília's superquadra**, München: Prestel, 2005.



thesis. In this sense, Piccarollo makes a great contribution to the study of architecture, not only of translation but of synthesis of material that is dispersed in several publications and archives.

The book comprises five chapters, an introduction, and a presentation by Fernando Luiz Lara. In the introduction, Piccarollo exposes his interest in the figure of Costa and explains how she got to know his work. The first chapter begins in 1930, with the appointment of Costa as director of the National School of Fine Arts and his duty to modernize the architecture course. The chapter explores the political contexts that led to his appointment, as well as the conflicts between conservative and progressive wings of the school, which resulted in his removal from office.

The second chapter focuses on the two commissions given to Costa by then Minister Gustavo Capanema, the projects for the headquarters of the MES (Ministry of Education and Health), and the urban design of the University of Brazil campus. The text highlights the whole context of disputes that resulted from the cancellation of the competition for the ministry's headquarters and the events related to the hiring of Le Corbusier as a consultant in both projects. The third chapter deals with the consolidation of modern architecture as an instrument of political propaganda for the construction of national identity, as well as the international recognition of Costa and his team, among which Affonso Eduardo Reidy and Oscar Niemeyer stood out. The chapter also explores the ambiguities of Costa's ideological alignment with Getúlio Vargas's authoritarian government. The fourth chapter develops around his professional performance, many times considered contradictory - on the one hand, fighting for modernism and on the other hand, acted in the preservation of the Brazilian colonial heritage at SPHAN (National Historical and Artistic Heritage Service). In the fifth and final chapter, Piccarollo talks about his professional consolidation, the expansion of his network of contacts, and the participation in international events and projects, and ends with the project for the new capital of Brazil - Brasília.

The book shows an intense search for primary documents from the most varied origins that, without a doubt, will enrich future research and arouse interest in students and curious about the life and work of Lucio Costa. In addition to a well-founded work, the author creates a narrative line that seeks not only to enhance the architect's genius, revealing other factors that influenced the direction of his career. Perhaps this is the main quality of the book, providing an intense literature review in a synthetic way that not only revisits what has already been written but also presents original documents and information, even for the Brazilian context. In this sense, its reading becomes essential for those who seek to understand in detail the complexity of this personality and the spread of modernism in Brazil.

Although at times, the text is a little tiring due to the amount of information, it is very well referenced, and its reading is pleasant.

Despite the qualities already mentioned, the book starts from critical revisionism that seeks to illuminate characters that have been silenced by official Western historiography, but this critical bias gives rise to a more historicist record of his career rather than a critical one. Although the text brings to light some ambiguities and contradictions that permeate Costa's professional performance, others have been suppressed and should be further developed, albeit in a future review. Although the focus has been on his professional career since 1930, particularities that precede the book's starting point would deserve a closer look. It would be the case of a critical position concerning to his professional performance, especially regarding the relationship between modernity and coloniality, since this issue is central, including the problem of invisibility that the book proposes.

Latin American authors such as Arturo Escobar (2011), Walter D. Mignolo (2002), and Aníbal Quijano (200) have pointed to the racial issue as a central element of modernity, which is more evident in countries with a colonial-slavery past. Although this issue has a bearing on professional thinking and practice, it has been suppressed in the book. In *Eugenics in the Garden*, for example, Fabíola Lopez-



Durán (2018) demonstrates Le Corbusier and Lucio Costa's ideological connection with the eugenicist movements (racial supremacy). In an interview with the newspaper *O Paiz* on January 7, 1928, the architect himself states that the problem of Brazilian architecture was a racial issue and that without selective immigration (population whitening) there would be no way to produce good architecture. Helio Herbst (2008) talks about the sculpture "The Brazilian Man" made by Celso Antônio to stand in front of the MES, but which was rejected due to his black features that did not correspond to the ideal Brazilian man. Or even Bruno César Euphrásio Mello (2020) who deals with the negation of the black contribution to Brazilian architecture in SPHAN publications during the period in which Costa was the director of the Department of Material Heritage, including quotes from the architect himself.

Although the works cited above show the urgency of bringing a more critical view of the canon, it does not invalidate the quality of the work done by Piccarolo, the book highlights these issues and raises questions about the cultural dimension of his writings and professional practice.

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