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*Popular Culture and High Art in the Work of Oscar Niemeyer**

THE WORK OF the Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer (b. 1907) demonstrates how the abstract “high art” of modernism has appropriated local Brazilian traditions and manipulated the forms of popular culture for its own ideological purposes. This process may be clearly seen in two representative works by the architect: the house he designed for himself in 1942 in the Lagoa district of Rio de Janeiro (figure 1), and Rio’s Passarela do Samba, or Samba Stadium (figure 2), designed some forty years later. These two projects correspond to the two distinct social realms which, according to anthropologist Roberto DaMatta, define Brazilian society: house and street. Each of these social domains operates according to its own set of rules and rituals: whereas the house is “a differentiated space that speaks of social divisions, control, and privacy,” in the uncertain world of the street, the basic law is that of *malandragem*, “the art of using ambiguity [or ambivalence] as a tool for living.” In the public realm of the street (and espe-

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1994 Annual Meeting of the College Art Association in New York. I would like to thank Edward J. Sullivan, chairman of the session “Popular Culture and Latin American Art,” for his critique of the text and his encouragement of my work. The monuments discussed in this article are dealt with at greater length in my book, *Oscar Niemeyer and the Architecture of Brazil*, New York, George Braciller, 1994.

I would like to thank John Meier Jr. for providing figure 7 and allowing me to reproduce it here. Figures 1-6 are from the Fundação Oscar Niemeyer in Rio.

cially during carnival), “deceit, deception, and roguery prevail until some form of hierarchical principle can surface and establish some kind of order.”¹ An analysis of the Lagoa house and the Samba Stadium suggests how the interest in privacy, control, and social hierarchy expressed in the architect’s house is carried over into the public realm of the stadium, in which we may observe the subtle “domestication” of the carnival ritual in the context of the demagogic politics and elitist social engineering of Brazil’s diffusionist-developmental regime.

Niemeyer’s Lagoa house and Samba Stadium also illustrate the crucial role modern architecture has played in the creation of new cultural symbols for Brazil. Underlying the ideology of both works is the modernist belief in the power of the abstract “high” art of the genius to achieve a new cultural synthesis of the modern and the local—a national *avant garde*—and to project an image of social unity and political consolidation through architecture. Implicit in much of Niemeyer’s work is the assumption that if architecture has the power to change society, then it does so more through creating new traditions and symbols than through trying to rehouse the masses. Especially after the failure of Brasília’s utopian “social condensers,” the architect and his government patrons have become aware of the difficulties involved in the project of trying to improve society through changing where and how people live. The Samba Stadium suggests a more subtle but potentially more effective approach: the attempt to influence people by controlling where and how they play. While rhetorically feeding the populist and egalitarian dream of a Rio and a carnival that “belong to the people,” Brazilian modernizers, through their mastery of the art of *malandragem*, have in effect used architecture and popular rituals such as carnival to enact what Youssef Cohen calls the “manipulation of consent.”² The Samba Stadium is only one example of how government-sponsored public works may function to co-opt the Brazilian masses into accepting an elite-controlled model of socio-economic development. The project thus reflects the contradiction between the egalitarian rhetoric of modernist “reformers” and the Brazilian reality they have fostered.

1. Roberto DaMatta, *Carnivals, Rogues, and Heroes: An Interpretation of the Brazilian Dilemma*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1991, pp. 64–65.

2. Youssef Cohen, *The Manipulation of Consent: The State and Working-Class Consciousness in Brazil*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989.

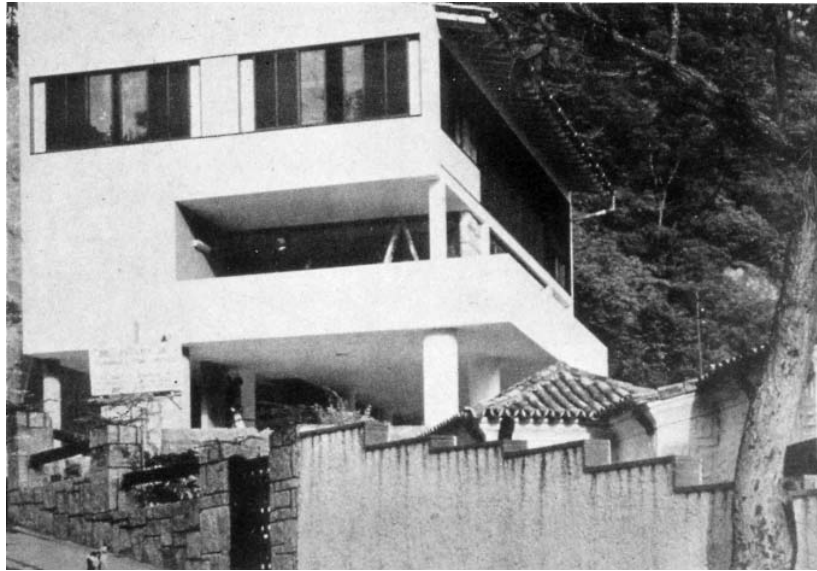


Figure 1. Photograph: Fundação Oscar Niemeyer, Rio de Janeiro.

Although they each use different means, both the house and the stadium reflect and reinforce the traditional social dichotomies and elitist power structure upon which Brazilian society is based. The Lagoa house, one of several houses Niemeyer designed for himself in and around Rio, reflects the self-serving attitude of Brazil's upper class toward the country's housing crisis. With its cramped service quarters below and spacious living areas above, the house is not only a barometer of the persistence of traditional social hierarchies into the modern age, but also an excellent gauge of the architect's innermost feelings about himself and his architecture. The house an architect designs for himself is as much a personal playground as a residence, and here we find Niemeyer playing some of his favorite design games as he strives to create a new symbolic unity based on the symbiosis of the discourses of Le Corbusier and Rio de Janeiro.

The Lagoa house (figures 3 and 4) is an excellent example of Niemeyer's adaptive synthesis of the Corbusian "five points" system and the vernacular traditions of his native Rio. Erected on a steep escarpment overlooking the Rodrigo de Freitas Lake, the house has pilotis, a free plan, and a free facade



Figure 2. Photograph: FON.

with modified ribbon windows. The architect took up the theme of Corbu's Citrohan house—a reinforced-concrete cube with a split-level livingroom—and modified it, according to Brazilian colonial practice, with the addition of a broad partially-covered veranda, white stucco walls, blue-wooden blinds, and a single-pitch red tile roof to channel rain water away from the house and down the hill. Niemeyer's Brazilian interpretation of a Corbusian theme thus relieves the heavy purist monotony of the white Citrohan cube with a touch of vernacular color and texture, and a more open feeling of tropical airiness, structural lightness, and monumental elegance—the three most characteristic features of Brazilian modernism.

These three qualities are to a large extent a function of the structural system of thin pilotis, which enabled the architect to create an open but compact plan that maximizes the amount of useable space on the cramped, sloped site. The pilotis also elevate the dwelling, thus freeing it from the limitations of the site and providing the architect with a commanding view of nature, the lake, and the city below (figures 5 and 6). The use of ramps instead of stairs to create an interior *promenade architecturale* that culminates in the dramatic

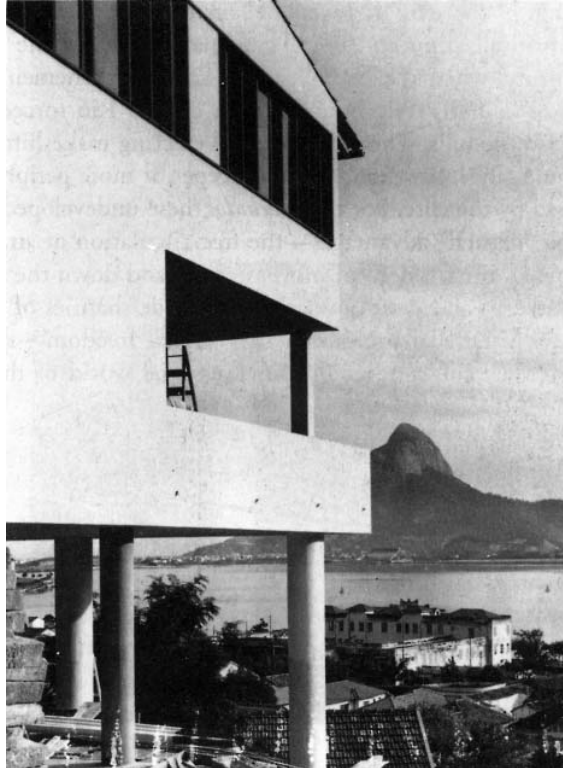


Figure 3.
Photograph: FON.

view from the livingroom window reflects the architect's interest in the control of shifting visual perspectives from above. From its privileged physical (and moral) position, high above the clamor of the city and the *malandragem* of the street, the house celebrates the values of privacy, individual freedom, and visual domination that are so important to Niemeyer as an artist and a man.

More than a synthesis of the Corbusian and the colonial, however, Niemeyer's house can also be seen as a modernist response to a problem typical of Rio: the shortage of space for urban housing. Since colonial times, Rio's unique topography has forced the city's inhabitants to settle in the narrow fringe of land hemmed in between the sea and the mountain

chain of the *serra do mar*. The lack of space for housing was intensified by industrialization and the "Haussmanization" of the city in the early 20th century, when the demolition of scores of tenement houses and the creation of Paris-style boulevards in central Rio forced the lower classes to climb the hills. There they started erecting makeshift wooden shanties and eventually entire *favelas* on the steeper or more peripheral sites left undeveloped by the elite. For the *favelados* these undeveloped hillside sites had certain "natural" advantages—the free circulation of air, the dramatic view of the sea, the freedom of movement up and down the hills. For all their inadequacies and disadvantages, the hillside shanties of Rio brought the *favela*—

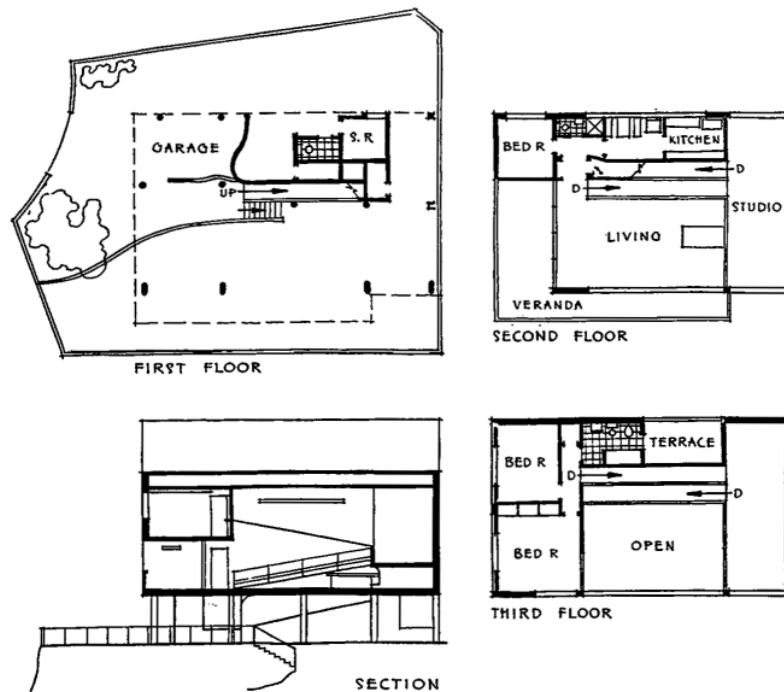


Figure 4. Drawing: FON.

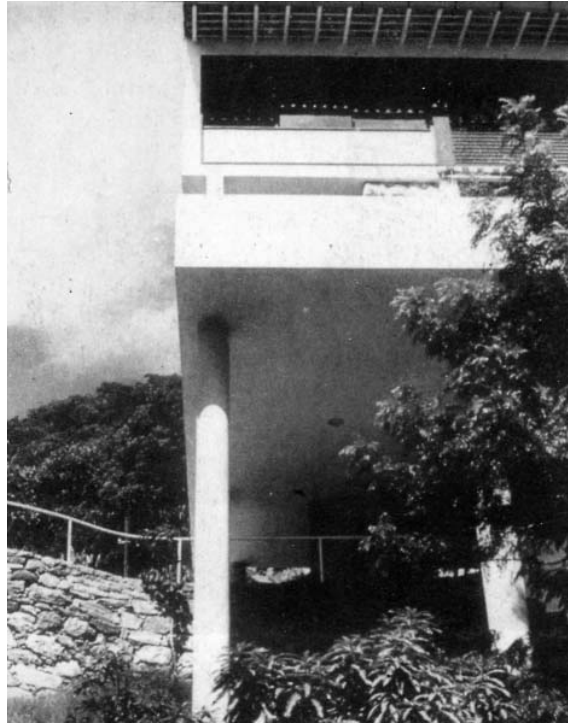


Figure 5.
Photograph: FON.

The urban underclass' spatial conquest of the idealized realm of the hills—a highly self-reliant form of social action—became a substitute for their social participation in the world of modern capitalism. The *favelados* may have been socially excluded down below, but they had liberty as individuals (theoretically) and the most spectacular view of the *cidade maravilhosa* and the sea.

Niemeyer was of course aware of this modernist discourse of the *favela* as an ideal realm high above the moral degeneration of the street and the city, a myth most forcefully promoted by his teacher Le Corbusier. Echoing Marc-Antoine Laugier's admiration for the noble savage and the "natural processes" that went into the creation of the rustic hut of primitive man, Corbu celebrated the "primitive purity" of the blacks in the shanties and saw in their experience the basis for a new modern style rooted in freedom, moral



Figure 6. Photograph: FON.

integrity, and a “happy” life in communion with a magnificent nature. In the “American Prologue” to his *Précisions*, Le Corbusier described the music of the “simple naive black” as the “basis of a style capable of being the expression of the feelings of a new time,” capable of breaking academic European tradition and finding “new explorations. Pure music.”³ He contrasted the “true” naked man with the false society man of Europe and the academies.⁴ He described how he “climbed the hills inhabited by the blacks” and found these blacks “basically *good*: good-hearted. Then beautiful, magnificent.” But he was most impressed with “their carelessness, the limits they had learned to impose on their needs, their capacity for dreaming, and their candidness,” which resulted in their houses “being always admirably sited,

3. Le Corbusier, *Précisions*, Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1991, p. 13.

4. *Ibidem*, p. 10.

the windows opening astonishingly on magnificent spaces, the smallness of their rooms largely adequate.”⁵

Partaking of this modernist ideology, patronizing and romantically idealizing in its attitude toward Afro-Brazilians and the lower classes in general, and especially toward their “carefree” lifestyle in the hillside shanties, Niemeyer’s house may thus be understood as a modern “monumentalization of the vernacular”—the transformation of a popular type into a standardized *maison type* for modern Brazil, but one that would serve the upper classes and not the masses. The Lagoa house thus reflects the elite’s usurpation of the popular tradition of the *subida do morro* (climbing the hills to get home). Seen in this way, the house serves to legitimize the elite conquest of the usual realm of the *favelados* by reference to a “popular” or vernacular image that conveys a sense of social solidarity or “unity” across the classes. But in appropriating the popular tradition of the *favela* and the *subida do morro*, Niemeyer’s house “elevates” this solution aesthetically into the realm of “high” modernist art for the elite.

The legitimacy of the Lagoa house as a new cultural symbol for modern Brazil thus lies in its fluency with both the “high” modernist discourse of Le Corbusier and the local Rio discourse of the hillside house. By appropriating and synthesizing both these discourses, Niemeyer gives his house a pedigree that is both modernist and Brazilian. But implicit in this legitimization is the acceptance of the *subida do morro* as a viable housing solution for the masses. Niemeyer has in fact justified the existence of the *favelas* by condemning the “capitalist” ideology behind their only tried alternative, the mass housing blocks that failed in Brasília:

“Workers housing” and “popular housing” are terms that indicate capitalist discrimination. They represent demagogic and paternalistic objectives that don’t attend to the scale of the misery. In fact they aim to prolong the existing situation, to peripheralize the *favelados* from the most valuable areas, to bury them in these horrible ghettos called *conjuntos proletários*, or under pretext of security and ecology, to turn the shanty areas to real estate profit.⁶

5. *Ibidem*, p. 9.

6. “Entrevista con Oscar Niemeyer,” *Módulo*, no. 58, 1980, pp. 26–27.



Figure 7. Photograph: Courtesy of John Meier Jr.

While there may be some truth in this critique of the diffusionist model, in the absence of a social revolution, Niemeyer's attitude in fact passively reinforces the existence of the *favelas* and the dilemma which has produced them. Meanwhile, with the housing problem "solved" by this passive ideology, Brazil's paternalistic governments continue to manipulate the consent of the masses by encouraging the illusion of Brazilian "democracy" through myth and ritual. Large public works projects promising to bring benefits to the many represent one such form of manipulation. It is in this context that the Samba Stadium should be viewed.

The Passarela do Samba (Sambódromo or Samba Stadium), begun in August 1983 and finished just four months later—in time for the carnival of 1984—illustrates how the Governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro, Leonel Brizola, and his Vice-Governor Darcy Ribeiro have used large-scale public works as a means to create new symbols of Brazilian popular culture (and improve their chances for re-election). Niemeyer, a long-time friend of Ribeiro, was commissioned to create a definitive architectural solution for the yearly celebration of Rio's most popular ritual, carnival (figure 7). Brizola's wanted to

replace the *arquibancadas* (temporary bleachers of steel tubing) with a more permanent structure that would seat a larger number of spectators. He claimed that it cost the public sector 7.5 million dollars a year, just to subsidize the samba schools and to set up and take down the *arquibancadas*. With this amount, he believed, a permanent solution could be funded. The initial outlay, he argued, would be recuperated in a few years, and the money saved and (eventually) earned could be put toward more important social reform projects.⁷ A major motivation for the new facility was thus financial: to save and ultimately raise money for the municipal coffers (and the politicians). But there remained the problem of justifying such a huge outlay for a permanent complex that would be used only for a few days per year during carnival.

Niemeyer's definitive solution called for the creation of a multi-functional complex featuring an open-air cultural center for 100 000 spectators, with public school classrooms beneath the bleachers, and a museum devoted to the samba. Following the line of thought elaborated by Ribeiro, this creative conflation of national ritual and public instruction was to contribute to the

7. See "Niemeyer cria solução definitiva para o carnaval," *O Globo*, Rio de Janeiro, September 11, 1983, p. 23.



Figure 8. Photograph: David Underwood.

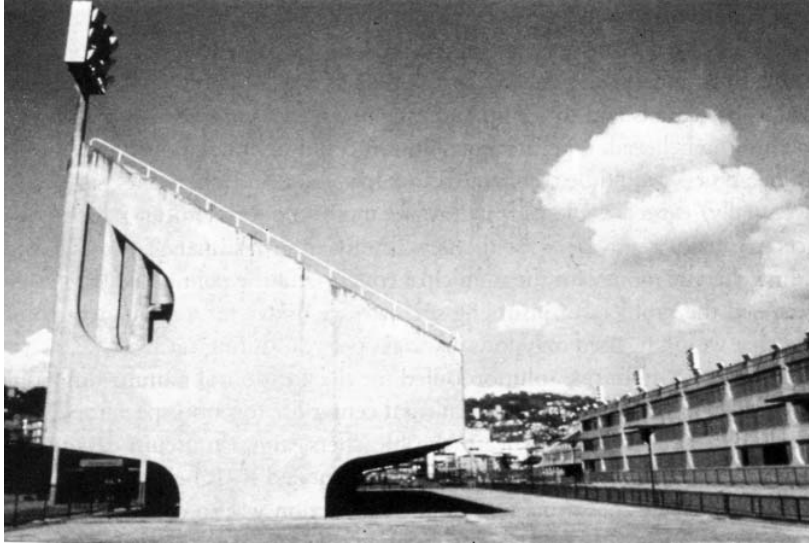


Figure 9. Photograph: D.U.

acculturation of Brazilian children, who would “learn the pride of being Brazilian” and absorb an understanding of the cultural importance of carnival and the samba. The proposal called for the creation of an integrated system of 200 rooms (40 square meters each) to be used as administrative offices during carnival and classrooms during the rest of the year. Twenty billion cruzeiros were invested. Sixteen thousand students were to be accommodated in “the biggest school ever built in Brazil.” Carnival thus becomes, as Niemeyer put it, “an almost secondary aspect of the Pasarela.”⁸

The structural solution was a technically daring one that called for grandstands cantilevered five meters above the ground, with suspended boxes that left a large “standing room only” or “general admission” area below, open at lower pricing to the public (figures 8 and 9). Niemeyer’s structural engineer, José Carlos Sussekund, was responsible for the structural calculations and the extensive use of pre-cast concrete elements in only ten modules. The most

8. Jorge de Aquino Filho, “Oscar Niemeyer” (interview), *Fatos e Fotos/Gente*, Rio de Janeiro, December 19, 1983, pp. 68-69. See also, Governo do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Riotur, *A Passarela do Samba*, Rio de Janeiro, Avenir Editora, 1983, no page numbers.

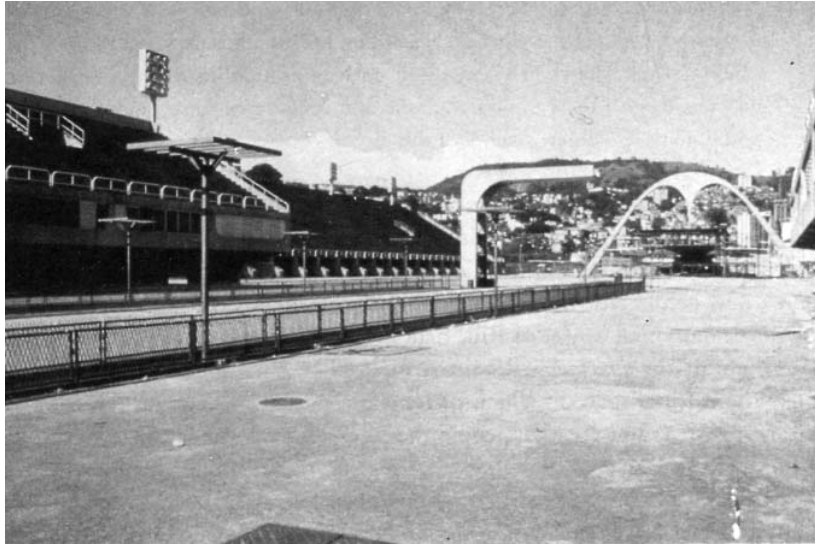


Figure 10. Photograph: D.U.

daring part of the design, however, was the thin, 25-meter tall arch which supports a concrete slab cantilevered dramatically over the stepped stage at the head of the parade esplanade, crowning the “Apotheosis Plaza.” The arch’s curving parabolic form—light, graceful, almost ethereal—is the trademark of Niemeyer’s work (figures 10 and 11). Niemeyer described the overall design problem in these terms:

The plans were based on the popular characteristics of the planned events, mainly the carnival parades, which had lately been entirely corrupted. Previously, the people used to watch the parades from the streets, without official limitations or bleachers. It was an event that really belonged to them. Later, the authorities in charge of organizing carnival built bleachers, walling up a narrow pathway, 7 meters wide, and blocking the people’s view of their favorite spectacle. To correct this error, we divided the bleachers into 60-meter blocks and raised them on pilotis, under which people can stand alongside the pathway and see the parade of the samba schools as they did before. And we proposed the inclusion of the Apotheosis Square to offer a new aspect

to the parade. In terms of its architecture, most important for us was, first of all, to find a simple and functional solution for the unusual integration of the school and bleachers, one that would not compromise its unity. The second step was to give the complex a plastic and innovative sense, something that would mark it as a new symbol of this city.⁹

Ribeiro too emphasized that the monument would become “a new symbol of carioca civilization,” and he compared it to those icons of Rio’s landscape, the Maracana stadium, and the Corcovado and Sugar Loaf mountains. More than a new democratic model for public schools, he cast the Sambódromo as the new ceremonial center of Rio. Echoing Le Corbusier’s celebration of the happy life of the *favelados*, Ribeiro wrote: “The Parade avenue complex is today the cultural space in which *cariocas* are free to re-identify themselves as the happy, free, and creative people that we are, with the courage to think, create, perform, and joke—things that register our existence in this world.” Meanwhile, the complex’s structural engineer, Sussekind, presented the stadium as a masterwork of national engineering: “Once again, Brazilian engineering set a new record for its annals: 17 thousand cubic meters of reinforced concrete were produced and 85 thousand square meters built in 120 days, right on schedule.”¹⁰ For his part, Niemeyer casts the Sambódromo as a “second Brasília,” a project of national pride and import, completed in record time—in yet another ritual performance of Brazilian modernism.¹¹

But for all this, the project has been criticized for repeating the defects of the temporary bleachers: poor visibility, little protection from rain, difficult restroom access, crowding of all the samba schools into one space at the head of the Parade avenue. Tickets to see the parade are now more expensive and harder to get, especially for the box seats with the privileged view from above. In 1988, there was a 700 per cent increase in the price of tickets, the cheapest ones selling for \$40.00, or the equivalent of a monthly salary for Rio’s poorest, who now are forced to watch the event on television. More fundamental is the fact that the construction of the Sambódromo on the working-class outskirts of downtown Rio implies a certain peripheralization of the event and its participants, as if the (European) business district could no longer

9. *A Passarela do Samba*, no page numbers.

10. *Ibidem*.

11. *Ibidem*.



Figure 11. Photograph: D.U.

handle the messiness of an (Afro-) Brazilian ritual. Traditionally, carnival has been characterized by a spatially widespread (if temporally limited) inversion of the structure of normal class relations: the *povoão* (popular class) “becomes king” of the city for its duration. In addition to being pushed out of the city center, the samba parade has been funneled into a fixed context with a hierarchical spatial solution that seems most concerned with controlling not only the event and its participants, but also the audience. A formalized linear procession has replaced the spatial (and social) fluidity of the spontaneous street carnival, which is now perceived as too dangerous, especially for Europeans. Perhaps most significantly, the stadium has accentuated the spatial and thus social distinctions between observer and participant, between consumer and performer, between “us” and “them.” The commodification and commercialization of carnival as a pre-packaged product to be consumed by tourist has thus been well served by the complex: artificial lighting has markedly improved visibility for the telecasting of the event.¹²

12. Sérgio Augusto, “Niemeyer, a beleza ancorou na passarela,” *Folha de São Paulo*, São Paulo, March 2, 1984, caderna ilustrada.

Niemeyer's "definitive" modernist solution is one that seems to be at fundamental odds with the libertine spirit of carnival: the spaces and structures of the stadium effectively "invert the inversions" of the normally fluid ritual through its concern with an orderly spatial procession with a clearly defined beginning and end, and clearly defined participants and spectators. The ritual process now seems less important than the pragmatic ends: the judging of the winning samba school, the media image, making money for "the state." Reinforcing these criticisms is the fact that the traditional carnival decorations were banned from display in the building in 1984, when it was inaugurated, only to be reinstated in 1988. It has been observed that without these decorations, the Sambódromo is a lifeless concrete forest. But Niemeyer and Ribeiro disagree: they find the decorations to be an abomination that disrespects Niemeyer's work and that, in effect, messes up his unified solution.¹³ The effort of Niemeyer and his patrons to clean up the diversity and messiness of carnival and control the arbitrary chaos that is central to the ritual seems at odds with the rhetoric of "a carnival that belongs to the people." Niemeyer and his patrons here demonstrate their mastery of the fine Brazilian art of *malandragem*. This mastery is perhaps the greatest link between the Samba Stadium and Brasília: an expensive project that purports to give something truly Brazilian back to the people is in fact not so subtly taking it away. ✻

13. Alexandre Martins, "A volta de um velho destaque," *O Globo*, Rio de Janeiro, January 17, 1988, caderno B, p. 1.

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