



Gregori Ilitch Warchavchik/Mina Klabin,  
1126 Bahia Street (Luiz da Silva Prado) House, São Paulo, Brazil, 1930-1931. © Source: Acervo da Biblioteca da FAUUSP.

## Houses beyond manifestos

BY RUTH VERDE ZEIN

Brazilian historiography on modern architecture, replicated by international authors, confirms the importance and the pioneer stance of Gregori Ilitch Warchavchik (1896-1972)/Mina Klabin's (1896-1969) 1927-1932 architecture in São Paulo, and the 1126 Bahia Street (Luiz da Silva Prado) house, 1930-1931, São Paulo, Brazil, is a remarkable example of their initial set of houses. Its design dialogues with other houses simultaneously designed by Adolf Loos (1870-1933), Le Corbusier (1887-1965), Juan O'Gorman (1905-1982), and the connections among all these modernist pieces and their authors suggest the informal existence of an interconnected network of creators, spread across continents. Likewise, they all put forward proselytizing strategies to amplify the repercussion of their works through exhibitions, publications, and debates. The generous internal spaces of this house on Bahia Street, the steady play of its geometrical composition, and its wise topographical and innovative landscape arrangements are well balanced, providing the authors' aim of both making a manifesto and providing the site and the client's necessities with an appropriate individual solution. The house has been used as a commercial space in recent decades, but it has been properly maintained and it is still in good shape.

Thirty-three hatted men stand on the street, in front of the house, one of them slightly detached to the right; two others stay inside the garden, one with no hat on his head, as is the 36<sup>th</sup> man waiting at the open door to welcome the group. It is cloudy, probably winter, which back then could be quite a harsh, windy and humid season, despite the city of São Paulo, Brazil, being located exactly on the Tropic of Capricorn, not far from the coast – 60 kilometers (km) – but with a milder climate due to the altitude [approximately 800 meters (m) above sea level]. The photograph was probably taken to be presented in the *Salão de 31*,<sup>1</sup> inaugurated on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1931. It was perhaps taken in the previous July or August, when the construction of the house was finished, and still displayed a sign with the name of the architect/constructor – who is perhaps one of the men in the photo, or maybe, the photographer himself.

This house was one of the first to be built in the new “garden city” neighborhood of Pacaembú, set on a hill slope looking northwest, with a small creek of the same name down in the narrow valley, soon to be completely transformed by the placement of the city's first municipal soccer stadium. Another house may be seen faraway in the misty background: it is actually above the opposite slope. The house of the photo stands on an irregular parcel of land, its curved front and back lines measure approximately 20 m each, it is 50 m long and from the main street to the back street it falls approximately 11 m: a portion of its slope may be seen in the lateral wall on the right side of the image. Despite the still almost bare surroundings, the house's quite luxurious and diversified vegetation and its terraced placement are remarkable, as well as an inseparable feature of its architectural design and detailing.

The image invites us to enter, so let's tour the house.

But before visiting it, let's stay a little longer in the parlor, have a welcoming cup of coffee – harvested by some local producer – and have a conversation, to reminisce on the circumstances of the authors' life, deeds and dreams, up to the moment this house was designed and built. For, although the international financial crisis of 1929 was hitting hard both the local and the global economy, a young generation of artists was still trying to make a difference and change the world. And make a living at the same time: the coexistence of both aims is not necessarily contradictory.

Warchavchik (Odessa, Ukraine, 1896 – São Paulo, Brazil, 1972) was born into a modest Jewish family. He studied architecture first at the Odessa Art School, then at the *Istituto Superiore di Belle Arti* in Rome, where he received a diploma as *professore di disegno architettonico* [professor of architectural drawing] for the *Corso Speciali di Architettura* [Special Architecture Course], in 1920. He worked for a couple of years at Marcelo Piacentini's (1881-1960) office, mostly on the final works to the *Cine Teatro Savoia*, in Florence. He came to Brazil in 1923, commissioned by the *Companhia Construtora de Santos* [Santos Construction Company], having worked there quite anonymously on several projects for its São Paulo office, until 1926. In 1925 he published a pioneering article on the subject of modern architecture in a local newspaper, after “the bustling local cultural atmosphere animated him into deepen his knowledge on the recent events of modern European architecture.”<sup>2</sup> In the same year he married Klabin (São Paulo, Brazil, 1896-1969). Born into a prosperous immigrant Lithuanian Jewish family, well-educated and traveled, she was a key influence on upgrading her husband's social and cultural life. She was probably instrumental in introducing him to the local artistic circles and in promoting his shifting

professional attitude towards a more enlightened clientele of a learned elite, able to accept the new architectural ideas. She helped him establish his own office in 1926, where she also acted as landscape and interior designer.

Warchavchik's formal experiences as a young architect in Italy may be read as showing

*the author's efforts to steer away both from the eclectic anxiety around originality and from the Heimat [home/homeland] nostalgia which were then in vogue (...) and a predisposition for a more sober style.<sup>3</sup>*

A sobriety that is possibly rooted in

*the discovery and appropriation of ordinary things – often anonymous, preindustrial, vernacular buildings and objects – (which) informed and transformed the practice and discourse of architecture and urbanism.<sup>4</sup>*

The frank adoption of a striking modern vocabulary and discourse in his works actually happened sometime after he was already living in Brazil. It was certainly stimulated by the flow of international publications, avant-garde artists' debates and the exchange of ideas among peers, either the locals or visitors passing through the city (such as Blaise Cendrars, among others). Back then, São Paulo was undergoing a huge demographic and geographic expansion, thanks to the increasing waves of migration and the pouring of rural capital into city industrialization.

Inside the house, we have to use our imagination, helped by contemporary images, to see how it was when just completed, since almost nothing of the original furniture has remained in the house. The few existing drawings and black and white images mostly show the public areas – and we never know whether the furniture was staged for the exhibitions and publications or was an actual representation of the family's daily life. One of the photos was taken from the northwest corner of the dining area looking diagonally to the parlor and the entrance area beyond. A curtain separates the two main rooms: its railing survived the passage of time, even after the house was rented for non-residential uses; not so much the lower translucent ceiling, in a sort of Mondrian-like color composition, hanging over the dining area. The photo's angle stresses the quite remarkable succession of planes and generous integrated spaces of the entrance level, suggesting a more somber, intimate atmosphere in the dining area, and a more open and day-light flooded ambiance in the living area. Although there were some light metal armchairs in a corner, most of the furniture seems to be of quite heavy ebonized and/or lacquered wood, and the contrast between lightness and heaviness, and between the straight lines of the spaces and some curved details of the furniture helps us date the image and confirm, again in this case, the somewhat paradoxical coexistence between modern spaces and eclectic interiors, as pointed out by some scholars.<sup>5</sup>

Warchavchik/Klabin's first "modernist" houses from 1927-1930 are in dialogue with those simultaneously being

designed by Adolf Loos (Müller House, 1928-1930) and Le Corbusier (Planeix House, 1925-1928); many other learned connections can be made among all the "modernist" pieces of architecture<sup>6</sup> within that moment, a feature that suggests the informal existence of an interconnected network of creators, spread across continents. He and Mina also keenly embraced the modernists' proselytizing strategies, amplifying the repercussion of each new house designed and constructed through exhibitions, publications and debates. In addition to providing social connections, she probably also revised his texts in Portuguese and participated in the houses' design with her progressive landscape and gardening ideas and skills.<sup>7</sup>

Warchavchik is not quite an unknown author: Brazilian historiography on modern architecture, often replicated as found by international authors, is threaded with debates on the importance of the pioneering stance of his 1927-1932 studio architecture. At that moment, and in the following decades, several instigating debates referred to his contribution, mostly to defend, sometimes very heatedly, the primacy of São Paulo's over Rio de Janeiro's Brazilian modernist initiatives. All these debates seem quite dated today, from a contemporary point of view. Today, instead of putting too much importance on mythical beginnings, as the fulcrum to reconsider the past, a more consistent approach would be to try to understand, even if partially, the complex and synergic real panorama of intricately woven and (un)connected facts, debates, ideas and works of that moment. As stated by historian Paul Veyne, "origins are rarely beautiful (...) the sub-lunar world has no depths, it is only very complicated (...and although) we can reach many truths, they will be partial."<sup>8</sup>

However, in architectural history we have the possibility of considering events that are not only in the past, having to be indirectly known by the disembodied memories of external situations. Historical architecture – or its manifestations, the buildings – keeps on existing, hopefully, in the present. So, although it is very important to learn as much as possible from the contextual situation presiding during the creation of a piece of architecture, it is also relevant to consider it in itself, via its material presence. Buildings are our main documents. They kindly allow us to re-approach them, now and again, to try and (re)construe their lessons, each time through different angles – literally and figuratively speaking – since their characteristics are not always immediately evident, or explicitly manifested.<sup>9</sup> These works may be (re)considered from different positions, sometimes even in partial or total contradiction with some of the previous established narratives accumulated over them, in the course of time, like crystalized crusts of layers.

As for example. The argument that these late 1920s/early 1930s houses by Warchavchik/Klabin are not quite "modern", since they were constructed using a mixture of traditional and new construction techniques, is completely flawed. Or better: if it is to be taken seriously and extrapolated, almost none of the listed examples in the canonical architecture histories would survive a thorough scrutiny. Recent studies on the renovation and conservation of these



**01** Gregori Ilitch Warchavchik/Mina Klabin, 1126 Bahia Street (Luiz da Silva Prado) House, São Paulo, Brazil, 1930-1931, lateral view immediately after construction. © Source: Acervo da Biblioteca da FAUUSP.



**02** Gregori Ilitch Warchavchik/Mina Klabin, 1126 Bahia Street (Luiz da Silva Prado) House, São Paulo, Brazil, 1930-1931, dining and living room. © Source: Acervo da Biblioteca da FAUUSP.

early examples are showing us how they had been mostly constructed using a hybrid of traditional/innovative ways; as so, debunking several pseudo truths on the supposed common knowledge about them – and even, putting *sub judice* their authors' statements in memorials and texts.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the boastful idea that the architects who designed those early "modernist" examples were "ahead of their time" may now be accepted, albeit from a twisted (but more precise) standpoint. It seems that those authors wanted their houses to appear to be more technologically advanced than it was feasible at that moment – and we should accept that this was a strategic move, not an error. They perfectly understood the actual conditions they had to cope with, and quite creatively, made the best of those limitations. This conundrum was even more frequent when it came to houses: although commissioned by wealthy people, there seldom was enough funding to allow the builders to go much further than the basic current ways of erecting small buildings. A similar situation happened to Warchavchik: lots of ink has been spent to discredit the Santa Cruz house (1927) for its hipped roof disguised behind a parapet – as if it were an unsurmountable taint to its status as "modernist." It is not – either by comparison, considering the factual construction situation of most of the so-called "modernist" houses of that period, in any and every other continent; or by the understanding that traditional materials are not an impeditive feature for granting a building a status of "modernity." A lesson that was, in fact, effectively learned in the 1930s, but was already there even before.

While this particular aspect does not seem relevant to me at all, the reason I have not chosen the Warchavchik/Klabin more famous "first" house for this case study, but instead another example among their initial set of houses, has other motivations. One is purely subjective: it is simply the one I like the most. For sure, my subjectivity has probably been fed by the sum of many other considerations. First, it is not placed onto an "ideal" parcel of land, flat and non-specific, able to accept some sort of prototypical solution. Instead, although its downward sloping site is a common characteristic of São Paulo's hilly topography, its unique situation asked for, and was fulfilled by, a careful and particular design solution. As such, the authors were struggling between two poles: the making of a bold generic statement, to befit Warchavchik's rising fame as an avant-garde modern architect, and the creation of a particular individual solution, to better attend the site and the client's needs. The house did achieve both goals: it became a piece of propaganda, but it was also a very accomplished building in which to live – initially as a house, and afterwards, in a second life, as an office. Secondly, its volumetric solution is both simple and complex, depending on how you look at it, or from where; and that is not just the result of a complicated aleatoric compositional game. It fully attends to the necessities of the first owner's family, while considering the decorum of its public facade on the somber south side and allowing the house to have open views to the rear north and west horizons, while still being partially protected from the sunset tropical glare through the clever placement of

verandas. It looks like a regular two to three story building when seen from the street, but when seen from the back, its four to seven story/terraced arrangement suggests the possibility of an experimentation with the idea of a high-rise volume. In brief, I like it because it is an accomplished and complex piece of design which cannot be fully understood without properly promenading it, in a real or a virtual way. And because its qualities as an avant-garde piece did not weaken it: its sturdiness assured it a sort of ageless quality that has helped it survive the decades quite well. And still, it looks so freshly new it makes you forget you are looking at an almost century-old house.

One can establish several connections between the architecture of this house and that of other better-known ones, designed at almost the same time by several other architects: in fact, a very erudite and thorough approach on that line has already been made.<sup>11</sup> Anyway, that is also a very tricky proposition: the current crystalized historiographic crusts tend to make us believe that the things that were earlier published worldwide are more relevant than other objects that were, until now, only known locally. A good cure for that bias is a triple sided remedy: the comparison of dates; the understanding that the word "influence" may not be the best qualifying term when things are happening simultaneously; and the consideration of the differences, which are of as much importance as the similarities.

For example. Although it is a legitimate approximation to compare the back facade of the Bahia Street house with Walter Gropius' (1883-1969) Zuckermandl House in Jena (1927-1929), due to the evident similarities at first sight of their volumetric aspects, when you look a bit further, the differences between them are also quite striking and mostly relevant. The basement of the later is coated in dark colors. This and the slightly prominent slab above it suggest that although Walter Gropius' house occupied a sloped terrain, the designer wanted to create a sort of "platform," a horizontal podium, over which the house was meant to stand, debasing the lower level into a less important space. In comparison, and on the contrary, the Bahia Street house *parti* does not try to elude the declivity but, rather, makes the most of it. Although the lower level is also employed to placing support activities – laundry, storage, etc. – it has the same visual status of the other levels; there is no discontinuity from top to bottom, the verticality is explicitly stressed, and the rear gardens, arranged in three different levels to take advantage of the slope, are treated as a most important part of the dwellers' daily life. Or, as said above, the authors did not let the desire to make a generic manifesto interfere with the design ideas. But in the end, they put forward a much more powerful statement, able to disprove the idea that modern architecture did not consider the place. Good modern architecture, actually, does. The same kind of considerations may be done when observing the garden design, which may be read as a sort of French-cubist quote. On the other hand, the *damero* [grid street plan] arrangement is a common and traditional solution to plazas and parks in all Latin America, most specially in Mexico, where it was frequently re-appropriated by





**03** Gregori Ilitch Warchavchik/Mina Klabin, 1126 Bahia Street (Luiz da Silva Prado) House, São Paulo, Brazil, 1930-1931, terraced arrangement of the site. © Source: Acervo da Biblioteca da FAUUSP.



**04** Gregori Ilitch Warchavchik/Mina Klabin, 1126 Bahia Street (Luiz da Silva Prado) House, São Paulo, Brazil, 1930-1931. © Mme. Stein São Paulo. Source: Acervo da Biblioteca da FAUUSP.





05 Gregori Ilitch Warchavchik/Mina Klabin, 1126 Bahia Street (Luiz da Silva Prado) House, São Paulo, Brazil, 1930-1931.  
© Source: Acervo da Biblioteca da FAUUSP.

its modern architecture, as for example, in the houses designed by Juan O’Gorman. That is perhaps a much more probable source of inspiration to Klabin’s gardens than the alleged European connection. And of course, the conspicuous use of succulents and cactuses (in this case a Brazilian variety, mandacaru, *Cereus jamacaru*) endorses the likelihood of this hypothesis.

In the early 1990s the house was rented to an architecture and graphic design firm. An “as built” drawing was prepared, and the house was adapted to a commercial use,<sup>12</sup> with very few, but reversible, changes. The electrical wiring and the hydraulic piping were updated to conform to contemporary regulations, some dry walls were added to organize the internal spaces in the basement floor, a few partition walls were removed (and their original positions were marked by strips of special flooring), all the windows were cleaned and renovated, with no major changes, and an important work of fumigation of the rear gardens was put forward, to prevent as much as possible the possibility of the house being invaded by termites. The closing wall to the lower back street had to be properly sustained because it was about to collapse due to the growth of the roots of a huge Brazilian tropical tree (*Pau-ferro*, *Caesalpinia ferrea*). The renovation of the wiring was much facilitated by the fact that there was no concrete slab between the main and the first floor, which was originally built using a timber structure, protected by a stucco lining with crown moldings on the underside. That allowed the substitution of the wiring conduits via the removal of pieces of the upper timber floor, which were afterwards carefully repositioned in their original locations, maintaining the original ceiling untouched. It is interesting to note that such structural solutions between these floors (with a timber structure instead of a concrete slab) helps alleviate the weight over the two back 7 m horizontal windows which are evidently the most daring construction aspects of this house.

Some discreet changes were made, with the agreement of specialists from the federal and the state heritage agencies. The low height wall of the front garden was removed, maintaining the still existing vegetation to the left – at

that moment, the original group of plants to the right side was no longer there. The resulting open space was used to attend the municipal regulations concerning the number of parking spaces, necessary for its commercial use. The front door was quite small, even for a residential use. It was replaced with a bigger metal door that maintained as much as possible the original door appearance. Investigation uncovered the original color of the house – a sort of very light green and all the window frames were originally painted in a light beige color. Nevertheless, they agreed to maintain the more recent overall white color, since the works done were not considered a full restoration, but as a minimum interference renovation. A situation that was feasible because, despite the age and the continuous use of the house, in was still in quite a good structural condition.

One of the more interesting features of the house – its triple level metallic structure front staircase, with thick translucent glass steps – was actually not a characteristic of the original 1930 design, but had been added by Warchavchik himself in a later intervention. The renovation carried out in the 1990s maintained and fully restored this stair. Because the glass steps were very damaged by scratches, they were carefully removed, polished and sandblasted, and then repositioned in their places – upside down, to show a new smooth face.

The architecture/design firm used the space for around 25 years, eventually allowing random and scheduled visitors to enter and visit it. Nowadays the house is vacant, for rent and waiting for its next user. When it was designed in the 1930s, it was a relatively compact house for a large wealthy extended family with a large staff. Today, its over 500 square meters (m<sup>2</sup>) area is quite excessive for the use of any contemporary compact family. The surroundings have also changed, and now the zoning law accepts some types of quiet and discreet commercial uses. Many other very interesting modern houses in São Paulo are at risk of being demolished, not just because they have aged, but due to the changes in the life styles of potential families interested in living in the residential quarters in which they stand. This house is not quite at risk of being destroyed as the owners are quite conscious of its importance and also of its protected heritage status.<sup>13</sup> But as we know, when a building has no use its decay rate tends to accelerate. Let’s hope it is not the case here, despite the economic shortages and recessions that are troubling the world at the beginning of the second decade of this century.

#### Notes

- 1 More Information on the *Salão de 31*, organized by Lucia Meira de Lima, Carlos Zilio and other members of the “Observatório do Modernismo Brasileiro”, is available at <https://www.salao31.com/o-salao-de-31> (accessed on 29 August 2020).
- 2 Jose Lira, Warchavchik. *Fraturas da Vanguarda*, São Paulo, Cosac Naify, 2011, 126.
- 3 Idem, 84.
- 4 Michelangelo Sabatino, *Pride in Modesty. Modernist Architecture and the Vernacular Tradition in Italy*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2010, 3.
- 5 Cf. Marta Peixoto, *A Sala bem temperada – interior moderno e sensibilidade eclética*, Porto Alegre, PROPAP-UFRGS (PhD Thesis), 2006.

- 6 On the subject of the mechanisms and modalities of influences in architecture cf. Silvia Arango-Cardinal, “Las influencias en arquitectura. Tres premisas y una conclusión”, in Alexandra Kennedy-Troya (Org.), *Modernidad y vanguardia en América Latina 1930-1970*, Cuenca, Universidad de Cuenca, 2019, 81-94.
- 7 The biographical information about Klabin is quite scarce and the sparse sources for the most part repeat the same phrases, stressing her role as landscape architect, subliminally suggesting that her contribution to these early modernist houses was a sort of “posterior” addition, “surrounding” their architectural design, just adding “character and excitement to the modernist buildings designed by her husband” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mina\\_Klabin\\_Warchavchik](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mina_Klabin_Warchavchik), accessed on 29 August 2020). As I propose in this essay, a deeper examination of these houses – and most specially, in the case of the Bahia Street house – confirms that the landscape architecture conception is inseparable from these houses’ conceptual ideas and design, and critical to their architectural definition. On the silencing and invisibilization of women architects cf. Ines Moisset, “Poetisas y arquitectas. Historias silenciadas”, in CrucesArquitectura Blog, 17 June 2017, available at: <https://crucesarquitecturayciudad.wordpress.com/2017/06/17/poetisas-y-arquitectas-historias-silenciadas/>, accessed on 29 August 2020; and Eva Álvarez, Carlos Gomez, *The Invisible women: How female architects were erased from history*, Architectural Review (online), 8 March 2017, available at: <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/the-invisible-women-how-female-architects-were-erased-from-history>, accessed on 29 August 2020.
- 8 Paul Veyne, *Como se escreve a história e Foucault revolucionou a história*, Brasília, UnB, 2014, 48.
- 9 Cf. Marina Waisman, *O Interior da História. Historiografia para uso de latino-americanos*, translation: Anita Di Marco, São Paulo, Perspectiva, 2013.
- 10 As for example: Ivo Hammer; Robert Linke, “White, everything White? Josef Frank’s Vila Beer (1930) in Vienna and its materiality”, in Ana Tostões, Natasa Koselj (Org.), *Metamorphosis. The Continuity of Change. 15<sup>th</sup> International docomomo Conference Proceedings*, Ljubljana, **docomomo** International/**docomomo** Slovenia, 2018, 410-416.
- 11 Jose Lira, op. cit., 232-240.
- 12 It was already being used as a commercial show room of a lighting fixtures firm before the house was renovated as an architecture/design firm headquarters. Architect Rogerio Batagliesi gave me information on the details of the renovation in the 1990s, in a personal interview. Rogerio Batagliesi was responsible for the project and management of those works. Due to the pandemic situation (July-August 2020, São Paulo, Brazil), it was not possible to revisit the house during the writing of this essay. I had to make the most of my memories when I (thoroughly) visited it in the early 1990s, with Rogerio Batagliesi himself explaining to me all the aspects, of which he reminded me again, in this recent conversation; and my memories from other visits there, while touring the city with foreign friends. I apologize if some specific information is not quite correct, despite our best efforts to be precise.
- 13 The Bahia Street house, along with Santa Cruz Street house (1927) and the Itápolis Street house (1929), by Warchavchik/Klabin, is part of a set of three buildings considered to be the first in modern architecture in Brazil. It has a full preservation status at three governmental levels: municipal (COMPRES/Resolução de tombamento 05/91), State (CONDEPHAAT, Resolução de Tombamento Ex-Officio 31/01/1994, Livro do Tombo Histórico No. 272, 70, 25/3/1987), and Federal (IPHAN, Número do Processo: 1153-T-85. Livro Belas Artes: No. inscr. 580, Vol. 2, f. 011, 14/08/1986). More information available at <http://www.ipatrimonio.org/Sao-Paulo-Casa-de-Warchavchik-R-Bahia/#/map=38329&loc=-23.55051990000001,-46.63330939999999,17>, accessed on 31 August 2020.

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## Ruth Verde Zein

Architect, FAU-USP, Brazil, 1977. PhD in Theory, History and Critique, Programa de pesquisa e Pós-graduação em Arquitetura da Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (PROPARG-UFGRS), Brazil, 2005. Capes Prize 2006. Professor of Modern and Contemporary Architecture and Design in Undergraduate and Graduate Programs at Mackenzie Presbyterian University, São Paulo, since 1997. Member of **docomomo**, Society of Architectural Historians (SAH), European Architectural History Network (EAHN), and International Committee of Architectural Critics (CICA). Former senior editor of *Projeto Magazine* (1983-1996). Former Member of the editorial board of *Architectural Histories Journal* (2015-2018). Member of the editorial board of *En Blanco* and *Arquitextos/Vitruvius journals*. Frequent contributor to Brazilian and Iberoamerican magazines. Participates in many seminars and debates and has given conferences and courses as visiting professor in several countries. She has had hundreds of articles and more than ten books published, the last one being *Critical Readings* (Austin/São Paulo, Nhamérica/Romano Guerra, 2019).