

# Listing and Protecting the MoMo.

## Brazil / Brasilia

By Andrey Rosenthal Schlee and Sylvia Ficher

*It's not enough to plant, we must know how to plant and care and persist, then, yes, the thing works.*

Lúcio Costa, Museu do Ouro, *Registro de uma vivência*, 1995

### Brazil

**A**LSO in the field of preservation, Brazil has made an unparalleled contribution to the MoMo. After all, when in 1988 **docomomo** was founded, the country already had a number of modernist works legally protected. And Brasilia had joined the select World Heritage of UNESCO, the first modernist urban complex to be conferred that honor. The precedent was established, and since then other MoMo works—all prior to Brasilia—received the distinction: the Bauhaus in 1996, the Schröder House and the University of Caracas in 2000, the Tugendhat House in 2001, the White City of Tel Aviv in 2003.

A rather bizarre circumstance, but well known and widely reported, where modernists and preservationists were the same people, all joined in a cohesive and hegemonic set of intellectuals from Rio de Janeiro, then Federal Capital. They were in charge of deciding, at once, what to protect from our past and how to design the architecture of our present. In other words, of choosing what could be erased from the country's memory and which should be the rightful aesthetic expression of its future image.

The heritage protection system now in force in Brazil was established by the Decree-Law No. 25 of November 30, 1937, during the Getúlio Vargas dictatorship (1930-45). This legislation created the National Historical and Artistic Patrimony Service (SPHAN), now National Historical and Artistic Patrimony Institute (IPHAN), and the main instrument for its action: the *tombamento*—the legal safeguard accrued to a landmark considered of national value, its register or listing.<sup>1</sup>

SPHAN's initial staff comprised architects of modernist leaning, such as Lúcio Costa, Paulo Barreto Thedim, Carlos Leão, Alcides Rocha Miranda, Oscar Niemeyer and Renato Soeiro. From then on until his retirement in 1972 Costa would be head of the Division of Studies and Listing.<sup>2</sup> Treated reverently as "Dr. Lúcio", he was respon-

sible for setting up the institute's preservation guidelines.

As one of his first tasks, he would inspect and assess the conditions of the Church of São. Miguel (c.1735-50), in one of the Guarani Jesuit missions in southern Brazil. Concurring with innovative preservation practices at that time, he recommended the consolidation of the ruins, ordering the remains to be collected in a small museum designed by him. The listing attained in 1938, after the museum's completion in 1940, was included in the listing as part of the church protected environment. The first step was taken toward registering recent buildings. Yet—as we shall see—only those authored by architects from the same carioca modernist set, clearly identified with the corbusierian manner.

Soon this trend became evident even abroad. Anticipating the *Brazil Builds* exhibition held in 1943 at the Museum of Modern Art of New York, in 1942 Life magazine publishes the article "Modern Brazil is a paradise for young architects". Illustrated with photographs by Kidder Smith, the text praises Brazilian contemporary architecture—above all the work of Oscar Niemeyer— and draws attention to the weight of official patronage in its development and protection.

The preservation of MoMo works was unequivocally assured in 1947 with the listing of Niemeyer's Church of São Francisco de Assis de Pampulha (1942-43), in Belo Horizonte. The matter was controversial, involving not only a monument recently concluded but also the opposing stand of the local clergy and town's population.<sup>3</sup> Costa's pragmatic solution was a *preventive listing*—taking into account "the unanimous acclaim for this work in the main centers of artistic and cultural responsibility around the world, particularly in Europe and the United States" and that "the exceptional value of this monument will lead to its register, sooner or later, as a national landmark".<sup>4</sup>

At the onset of Brasília's construction, there were four registered modernist landmarks. Besides the museum and the chapel, the Ministry of Education (1936), designed by a team coordinated by Costa from a draft by Le Corbusier and listed in 1948; and the Hydroplanes Station of Rio de Janeiro (1937), designed by Attilio Correia de Lima and listed in 1957.

If the urge to register modernist landmarks continued, it did not imply the inclusion of works outside the Rio de Janeiro axis. So much so that the Santa Cruz Street House (1927), in São Paulo, by Gregori Warchavchik—considered by many the pioneer Brazilian MoMo building—would be listed only in 1986, together with two other houses by the same architect. Until the listing of Brasília's Pilot Plan in 1990, among the eleven newly listed modernist works, only these three houses are not by architects from Rio. Among the other eight, two are by Niemeyer,<sup>5</sup> two by Costa, and only one by an architect outside their group.

## Brasilia

The ultimate step in the enthronement of Rio's modernist architecture would be given with Brasília. In 1956 Oscar Niemeyer was invited to be in charge of architectural designs, and the construction of the first buildings begun. In 1957 Lúcio Costa won the Pilot Plan competition. The city would be inaugurated in April 1960.

Just two months after the city's inauguration, President Juscelino Kubitschek, concerned with his oeuvre perpetuation, recommended its protection by IPHAN, hence under the care of its planner.

*The only protection for Brasília is in the preservation of its Pilot Plan—Adding it to the Heritage Registry would, I think, constitute a safety measure [...] Would you be so gracious as to study the possibility, even if it means slightly forcing the very interpretation of "heritage"? I consider this fortification indispensable against destructive assaults that already seem vigorous. Thank you for your consideration.*<sup>6</sup>

Still, despite the symbolic weight of Costa and Niemeyer and their close association with IPHAN, the federal register of Brasília would be anything but straightforward. At the outset, a working group was created to propose the inclusion of the urban complex in the UNESCO list. But that institution imposed conditions, among them the existence of local protection legislations. Hence the hasty register carried by the Federal District government, with the Decree No. 10829 of October 14, 1987.<sup>7</sup> Met the requirement, in that same year Brasília—read, the Pilot Plan—was declared World Heritage.

And the federal register just resumed, with a few changes, the Federal District decree, resulting in Ordinance No. 4, March 14, 1990. This rule, though, did not meet the interests of Costa and Niemeyer—actually the

latter architect's interests. Today the Pilot Plan is under the protection of Ordinance No. 314, October 8, 1992. The only difference is to be found in the addition of a paragraph establishing that:

*...when approved by the competent legal bodies, exceptionally, and of course as a temporary provision, it will be allowed the proposals for new buildings by the authors of Brasília, architects Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, as necessary complementary additions of the original Pilot Plan...*

The Brasília imbroglio seemed to have curbed the MoMo preservation surge. After all, from 1990 onwards there have been few of their listings. However, 2007 was a singular year: while Niemeyer was celebrating his centenary, the IPHAN reached its seventies. And nothing more appropriate than to celebrate the double anniversary with the register of twenty-four works from that architect who had integrated the first staff of the former National Historical and Artistic Patrimony Service.<sup>8</sup>

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## Notes

1. At that time, other American countries were also creating their preservation institutions, such as Argentina (National Commission for Museums and Historic Sites, 1938) and Mexico (National Institute of Anthropology and History, 1939).
2. Earlier, in 1930, the same Vargas appointed him director of the School of Fine Arts in Rio de Janeiro, in charge of reforming its academic education into a modernist course. Between 1936 and 1937, he coordinated the team that designed the Ministry of Education building and the University of Brazil campus. He was, therefore a man of trust for those in power.
3. So much so, that the consecration of the temple came only in 1959.
4. Tombamento da Igreja de São Francisco de Assis da Pampulha, 1947. In José Pessôa, *Lúcio Costa: documentos de trabalho*, 2004, pp. 67-68. The strength of Costa's opinions was such that the figure of preventive listing became a legal tenet.
5. Both in Brasília. The Catetinho—the temporary presidential residence, built in only ten days in 1956—was listed in 1959. In the case of the Cathedral of Brasília, in 1962 Costa argued against its listing, since the building was still under construction (Catedral de Brasília, 1962, in Pessôa, pp. 182-83); but in 1967 he changed his mind (Tombamento preventivo da Catedral de Brasília, 1967, p. 212). When consecrated and officially inaugurated in 1970, the cathedral was already registered.
6. Kubitschek's note to Iphan's director, Rodrigo M. F. de Andrade, 15 June 1960. Archives, Casa de Lúcio Costa.
7. With two texts by Costa appended: *Memorial descritivo do Plano Piloto* (1957) and *Brasília revisitada* (1987).
8. All in Brasília, except the Canoas House (1952) in Rio.

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