

# The Restoration of the Alvorada Palace\*

56



This article describes the highly successful restoration of Alvorada Palace completed in 2005 by Sergio Valle Brasileiro. After situating the importance of the Alvorada within Niemeyer's overall oeuvre and describing the original design, the dilapidated state of the building at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is described. The details of the restoration, including meetings with Oscar Niemeyer about specific design decisions and consultation with IPHAN, and the challenge of sourcing new materials to match the original, such as jacaranda—now protected by IBAMA—are also studied. The Alvorada serves as an example for the restoration of other Modernist buildings in Brazil.

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By Hattie Hartman

TODAY, *Palácio da Alvorada* looks as good, if not better—due to mature landscaping—than it did upon completion in 1958. It is open for public tours, a showcase for the Brazilian presidency and for Modern architecture. Oscar Niemeyer at his best.

The beautifully restored, gleaming building which greets visitors today is in marked contrast to the deteriorating building President Lula found in 2002 when he first crossed the threshold of his official Brasilia residence. The Alvorada was so leaky that during a visit by President Clinton in 1997, an array of buckets had to be placed behind a screen in the state dining room to cope with the infiltrations. Completed in 2005, the Alvorada restoration had minimal coverage in the Brazilian press, as politically astute Lula could not be seen to be pouring money into his own residence, when elected on a platform of socialist reform. He cleverly concluded that the best approach was to call on several private-sector companies to assure the bill—which they willingly did.

Despite Brazil's long-established tradition of Modern architecture, restoration of Modernism is only just starting as an imperative concern. Its lack of prestige is clear from the fact that the Alvorada restoration was perfunctorily assigned to a Bank of Brazil in-house architect. Fortunately for the Alvorada, this architect was Sergio Valle Brasileiro, a former University of Brasilia professor. Valle himself acknowledges that he initially perceived the project primarily as routine maintenance, without particular interest. Once he realized the project's significance, he moved to have it reclassified from refurbishment to restoration. This meant a review by IPHAN, Brazil's national patrimony institute, and liaison with the Oscar Niemeyer Foundation. Valle took it upon himself to make monthly trips to Rio to discuss design decisions with 'Oscar', who, after several sessions, gave Valle power of attorney to

take decisions in his name. Archival research turned up the original specification: a three-page unsigned document with minimal information.

Alvorada Palace occupies a unique place in Brasilia history because it was sited and designed prior even to Lucio Costa's master plan. This helps explaining its isolated position near the lake and away from the city. It was among the first non-timber buildings to be built on Brasilia's *cerrado*, and as such, the first monumental demonstration of President Juscelino Kubitschek's dream of relocating the Capital city from coastal Rio to the hinterland. Alvorada also marks an important turning point in Niemeyer's career. Not only did the commission for Brasilia, and Alvorada in particular, present the 49-year-old architect with the unparalleled challenge of how to represent Brazil's future in architectural form, but it came fast on his first European tour, where he had digested the lessons of classicism. Niemeyer's reinterpretation of a classical portico with the swooping curvilinear columns of Alvorada has an elegance of proportion and lightness of touch that is absent in much of his later work. Alvorada has nothing to do with "form follows function". This is form for form's sake.

Niemeyer's concept for the palace was straightforward: a long, low rectangular glass box between two plans supported by a distinctive colonnade. Located asymmetrically to the northwest, a miniature chapel enclosed in a spiral of white marble completes the ensemble. The palace's three levels include a main reception floor, an upper residential floor and a basement service area. Walls consist of floor-to-ceiling glazing in anodized aluminum frames, and privacy is provided by pale turquoise blinds. The state rooms, with their views to the landscaped gardens and Brasilia beyond, are spectacular gathering spaces, yet the building lacks intimacy as a residence. Given this, it's unsurprising that a couple of recent presidents have opted not to occupy Alvorada, which in turn helps explaining its deterioration.

< Alvorada Palace, Oscar Niemeyer, 1958. Photo by Enrico Cano

The architect chose a rich palette of Brazilian materials for the occasion: honed white marble for the exterior columns and polished black granite for the portico floor. The interior floors are jacaranda, an Amazonian hardwood similar to mahogany. However, poorly built at the outset due to the rudimentary site conditions, Alvorada had not weathered well. Brasília's strong sun and heavy rains had yellowed the building's white marble, and a poor detailing at the base of the glazed exterior wall had resulted in extensive water damage to the jacaranda flooring. Inaccessible pipe work had caused leaks inside. Kitchens and bathrooms, lighting and services were all in need of renewal, and air conditioning was required in certain rooms.

With the input of IPHAN, it was decided to retain as many original materials as possible. Though basically cooperative throughout the project, IPHAN did make one surprisingly major *faux pas*, recommending the removal of the 30 imperial palm trees which stand in front of the palace. IPHAN argued that they were not part of Niemeyer's original design and that they obstructed the view of the facade. Fortunately, Niemeyer saw the absurdity of the proposal, and it was abandoned.

Replacing the damaged floorboards was one of the restoration's major challenges, since jacaranda is now protected by IBAMA, the Brazilian regulating agency for environmental matters. Valle considered removing the upper layer of some of the tongue-and-groove boards to make up the shortfall, but found a better solution when, through IBAMA, he was able to locate some embargoed stock which proved adequate for the job. The pink marble of the first lady's bathroom also proved difficult to source. Niemeyer recalled the original supplier, an Italian importer in Rio now in his 80s, who was able to source a pink Turkish marble to match the original stone.

Another work included dismounting and restoring the glazed facades. Valle explains that budget constraints meant that neither the aluminum frames nor the glazing panels could be replaced. The 3.2 x 2.6m x 5mm-thick untempered glass panels did not meet our days building regulations, but in conjunction with IPHAN, it was decided that in order to respect the facade proportions, the original glazing would be retained.

The white marble exterior was cleaned with water spray and the portico's granite floor was polished to a high sheen. Only the lower course of marble on the chapel exterior was replaced. An extensive debate focused on the marble balustrade added in the 1980s along the walkway between the palace and the chapel. Valle considered it should be retained (because if removed it might be replaced with something worse). All water and electricity systems were rerouted to a cavity in the roof and,



as part of the work in the bathrooms, all plumbing was made accessible from the exterior to avoid future damage to marble walls.

The visitor's first glimpse of the palace is across a vast green lawn inhabited by *emas*<sup>1</sup>. Foreseeing its importance, Niemeyer incorporated an imperceptible level change between this vantage point and Alvorada portico to exaggerate the perspective. A reflecting pool mirrors the colonnade. Alvorada is elegant without being monumental, imperial palms included. Now restored to its former glory, the palace is lyrical and moving. These just hints at the emotion it must have evoked across the world in its days.

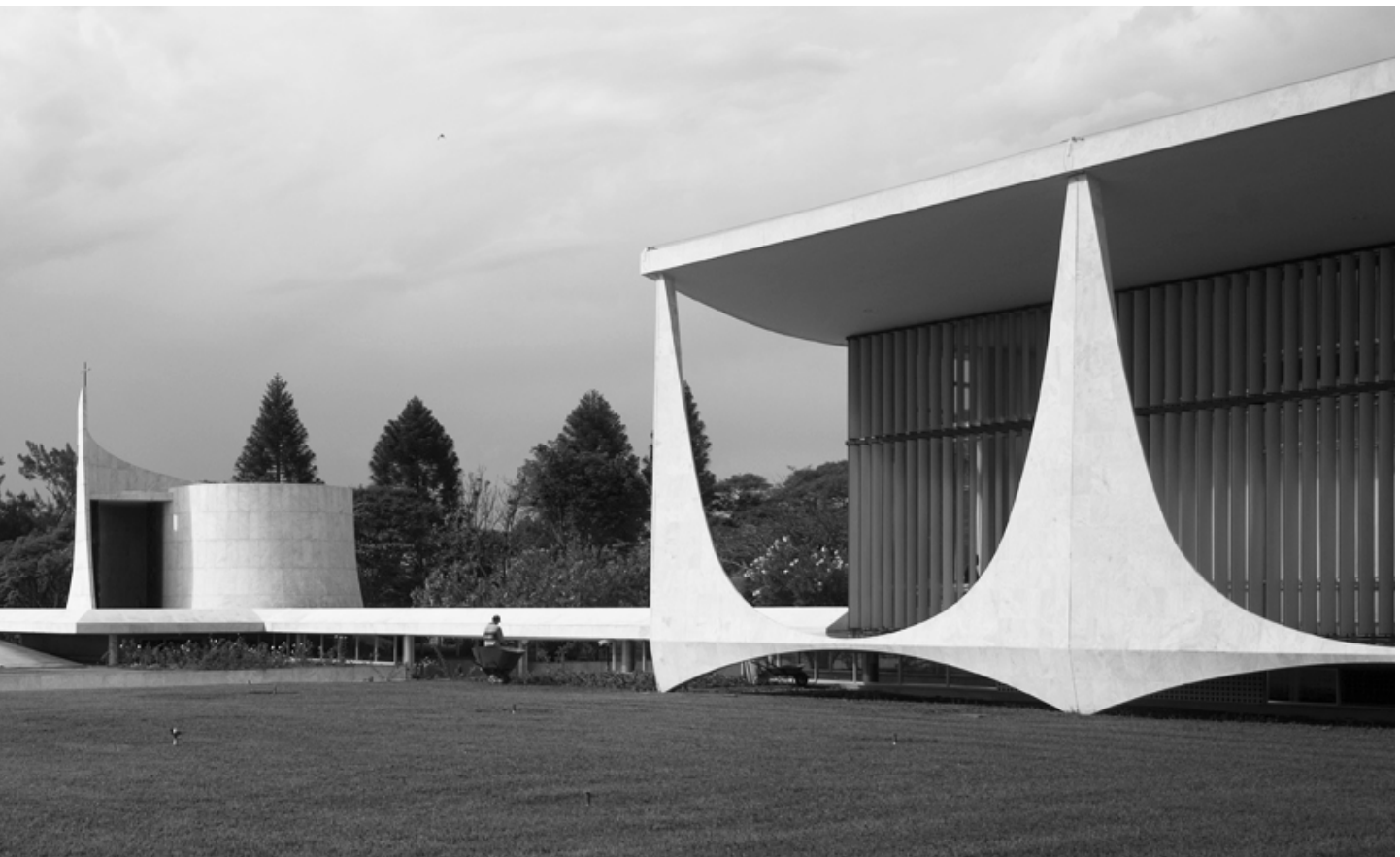
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#### Notes

1. Big rhea or American ostrich.

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Alvorada Palace, **Oscar Niemeyer**, 1958. Photos by Enrico Cano

