

# The Itamaraty Palace in Brasilia

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**This article explores the headquarters of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil, the Itamaraty Palace which is one of the most important buildings designed by Oscar Niemeyer in Brasilia. Besides the constructive complexity, in this project the architect organizes and ranks several spatial correlations, making the palace terrace—the *varanda*—its great architectural surprise.**

By Eduardo Pierrotti Rossetti

**B**RASILIA'S architecture remains impressing to all who visit the city, keeping the original force of its modernity. At the same time the presence of Oscar Niemeyer's architecture also retains its powerful meanings. Of the many works of civic-palaces, temples, courts, ministries, a work stands in a unique way: the design for the headquarters of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil, the Itamaraty Palace, conceived, designed and built between 1959 and 1970.

Overcome the euphoria of Brasilia inauguration in 1960, its effective consolidation was contingent upon transfer of the Foreign Ministry. More than one ministry transplanted from Rio de Janeiro to the savannah (*cerrado*), the new palace should meet expectations and political perspectives of the Brazilian diplomacy. Although the Palace of the Foreign Ministry very dense symbolic meaning, the uses of its dependencies must be flexible to work in accordance to the diplomatic routine demands. To this end, the Palace must have space for Brazil to exercise its diplomatic skills with other nations, with space devoted to symbolic exchanges. In ceremonies and social events, different degrees of formality are demanded, making use of the Palace of the Foreign Ministry is mediated by cultural codes and behaviors of those living and those who seek to dominate their space, or through the behavior of guests and hosts. Thus, the Palace architecture has to provide cultural and natural space conditions for the exercise of diplomatic activities.

The Itamaraty Palace complements the representative Ministries buildings, articulating the symbolic transition of power between the Ministries, the National Congress and the Three Powers Square, where the Presidential Palace and the Palace of Supreme Court are located. The Palace of the Foreign Ministry defines a correlation value and importance with the other palaces. Instead of concrete columns coated with white marble, setting a transparent box which touches the ground, Niemeyer works with concrete, designing a building whose shape is defined by a powerful arcade with 14 arches that support the entire symbolic Palace, emerging from a reflecting pool with a water garden designed by Burle Marx.

Oscar Niemeyer designed a palace with free plans according to a structural modulation. These free plans

are organized by transparent glass panels and independent walls defining a continuous space which can only be realized through the experience of promenades. Wandering among the lobbies and halls, stair climbing and inner spaces contemplation become part of the perception of the Palace whose elegance makes no concessions to extravagance. Itamaraty Palace proclaims a decent elegance without opulence, avoiding ostentation, by giving a sense of nobility to the purposes and programmatic practices that civic duties require. Niemeyer picks up several materials to hold on the project and to proclaim a noble meaning of the modern architecture language according to the function this Palace has to achieve. The architect organizes and ranks the spatial correlations, making the palace terrace—the *varanda*—its great surprise.

The veranda is an ancestral space for living in Brazil's sense of living. Originally it is characterized as a pleasant place to stay, a refreshing place that promotes the transition between the exterior and interior. The daily presence of the veranda configures spatial attributes of traditional character and its own, linked to cultural patterns of sociability and public coexistence, collective or private. So the veranda is an important nexus of Brazilian architecture.

The veranda is the most important saloon, the noble saloon of the Palace from where it is possible to realize all the "*architectural spectacle*" that Oscar Niemeyer could achieve at a monumental scale conceived by Lúcio Costa's urban plan, opening up to Esplanade of Ministries, National Congress and Ministry of Justice. The structural aspect of the Foreign Ministry Palace arches become a remarkable intermediary device of interior/exterior relations concerning the Palace, the Esplanade, the city and the landscape, framing the *cerrado* skyline. Thus, the Palace *varanda* ensures privacy for those who can look into the monumental scale of Brasilia, leaning on its window-sill, housed under the arcade framework.

Fully integrated with the halls, with the reception rooms and a banquet room, the veranda also becomes a strategic space on the ceremonies dynamics. Inherent informal habits and lifestyles contribute to change the profile of joint operation of the Foreign Ministry, pointing out other possibilities for sociability and interaction in this space.



Figure 1. Itamaraty Palace's above the water garden designed by **Burle Marx** Photo by: EPR-2008

Figure 2. Social saloons viewed from the veranda: transparency, modern art and old furniture in a continuous space. Photo by: EPR-2008

Figure 3. Brasilia Banquet Room opened to the veranda. Photo by: EPR-2008

Figure 4. National Congress viewed from Itamaraty's Palace veranda. Photo by: EPR-2008

Figure 5. Varanda under the arcade's framework and *Meteoro* sculpture. Photo by: EPR-2008





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Thus, Niemeyer subverts the rigidity of the architectural program and adds another reference to the social and behavioral codes. So much more than an airy space or shade, the veranda becomes an extraordinary spatial device which is able to revolutionize the symbolical function of a palace designed as a Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Thus, Oscar Niemeyer emphasizes the architectural complexity without exacerbating his usual speech in defense of a free form. While the arcade remains as the Palace's strongest image, the architectural project keeps its constructive materiality. Niemeyer revolutionizes his own architecture, revitalizing and subverting the meanings

that only he can establish with the *praxis*, confirming his political beliefs through the intrinsic uses of the *varanda*.

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