Predators and Cannibals: The Ministry of Education and Health in Rio de Janeiro

Annette Spiro
Translated by Thomas Skelton-Robinson

In 1922, one hundred years after the founding of the Empire of Brazil and independence from Portugal, the *Semana de Arte Moderna* took place in São Paulo. Like a clap of thunder, the cultural week ushered in Brazilian modernism and in retrospect can be seen as the starting point and a seminal moment in what was an autonomous cultural development. Every newly founded nation and society with a colonial past is faced with the question of its own identity — an issue that continues to be bitterly bargained over, particularly recently under new omens.

In the following essay, the focus rests on a particular building, and with it a whole country in which the ancestral population lacked the resources with which to resist the colonisers, and that was profoundly marked by both its European conquerors, and the African slaves they forcibly brought with them. The cultural impact of Africa was deep and the roots tangled, no better personified than in the unique figure of Antônio Francisco Lisboa, known as 'Aleijadinho', the greatest master builder and sculptor of the Brazilian baroque, whose mother was a Black slave.[1]

The architecture of colonialism, and in particular Brazilian baroque, has been thoroughly researched and its particular manifestations are widely recognised. Similarly to its baroque architecture, the country's classical architecture and its École des Beaux-Arts derivatives were largely inspired by European models. At first glance, this might also be said to apply to Brazilian modernism in the sense that like much else it too was a European import. Many of the key Brazilian architects trained in Europe, or at least in schools based on the École des Beaux-Arts system. Gregori Warchavchik, the pioneer of Brazilian modernism, studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome; Rino Levi at the polytechnic in Milan and under Marcello Piacentini in Rome; Lúcio Costa completed his studies at the Escola de Belas Artes in Rio de Janeiro. Costa, later the planner of the new capital

1 Flanking him is Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, the most important and influential figure in Brazilian literature, founder and director of the Brazilian Literary Academy, who was similarly a descendant of Black slaves.

Brasília, was also the central figure in the building of the new Ministry of Education and Health in Rio de Janeiro, planned and built from 1939 to 1943. It was likewise Costa who in 1936 invited Le Corbusier to join the consultations for the new building, thus triggering a momentous encounter.

Le Corbusier had already once travelled to South America in 1929, giving lectures in Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. The journey was undertaken at the urging of his friend the poet Blaise Cendrars. Both men came from La Chaux-de-Fonds in the Swiss canton of Jura. Cendrars was acquainted with the most important protagonists of the *Semana de Arte Moderna*, the writers Mário de Andrade and Oswaldo de Andrade, and with the painter Tarsila do Amaral. It was this circle of friends who were responsible for Le Corbusier's invitation and his first journey to Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay. At this point in time it might have been more obvious for Brazilian intellectuals to invite a Bauhaus representative, such as Walter Gropius, or Frank Lloyd Wright from the USA, to give a lecture series, especially considering that Le Corbusier was only just beginning his career. His writings and his journal *L'Esprit Nouveau* were more well-known than his early buildings. As it was, the encounter between the Swiss pioneer and the young Brazilian republic proved to be an astonishing match in numerous regards.

What Le Corbusier discovered in Brazil was a country brimming with optimism about the future: audacious, inventive, ready for the new — precisely what the young architect found lacking in Europe. South America provided him with the opportunity — at least on paper — to sketch out his utopian visions, plan new cities and implant projects in the midst of verdant nature, untrammelled by the opposition of traditionalists. His lectures were lapped up enthusiastically by the local architectural community. Le Corbusier, who travelled over the Atlantic on a steamship (amongst the fellow passengers was the American dancer Josephine Baker, whom he drew a portrait

of), for the first time climbed into an aeroplane and made bird's-eye sketches of the untouched South American landscape (Figs. 3–5). This totally new perspective inspired his new urban design ideas, which without the new form of transportation might never have come about as they did. Le Corbusier sketched urban visions for São Paulo and Montevideo, or projects such as the six-kilometre-long apartment block in Rio's hilly surroundings, traces of which stretch down to the architecture of Oscar Niemeyer or Affonso Eduardo Reidy (Fig. 6).

However, Le Corbusier's second trip to Rio de Janeiro in 1936 proved to be even more seminal in terms of Brazilian architectural discourse, asked this time by Lúcio Costa to assist in planning the ministry building in Rio de Janeiro. After the competition for the new ministry had been decided in favour of a project designed in the Beaux-Arts style, the newly appointed education minister Gustavo Capanema had pushed for the winner to be paid the prize money but to entrust the further planning to the losing Costa and his modernist proposal. The latter insisted that his fellow competitors who had likewise submitted modern designs should join him in the realisation, with the result that a team of young architects was formed, led by Costa and consisting of Affonso Eduardo Reidy, Ernano Vasconcellos, Carlos Leão, Jorge Machado Moreira, landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx, and the youngest of the group, the trainee Oscar Niemeyer. Le Corbusier spent a whole month with the team. He suggested an alternative location for the new building, situated at the seashore close to what is today the Santos Dumont airport. The open situation seemed to him to be ideal for a modern freestanding edifice. Nevertheless, the city-centre site was stuck to — a lucky happenstance, as hindsight clearly shows. The consultations concluded with a new proposal. Le Corbusier's sketches show the first idea, the positioning of the architectural volume and equally the later deviations from the original plan. The positioning, building form, volumes and proportions were all amended as the design process proceeded (Fig. 7). The individual stages are

documented in the drawings, the most interesting of which is the final alteration undertaken by the team of Brazilian architects. The high-rise slab became thinner, taller, and was sited perpendicular vis-à-vis the original design. Instead of standing at the edge of the open quadrangle it now stood in the middle of the building plot. Facing Araújo Porto Alegre street, a forecourt emerged; on the other side of the building, a city plaza. This modification produced a new constellation, and with it one of the most astonishing and impressive sequences of public spaces in the modernist canon.

The ministry was the first civic building in South America to be built in a modernist style and the first curtain-wall building on the entire American continent (Figs. 9–11). That Le Corbusier's 'Five Points' from his programme for a 'New Architecture' would be applied was never in doubt. He himself had yet to realise a similarly large building based on his premises. The roof garden, the free facade design, the open ground plan, the ribboned windows and the pilotis on the ground floor — all five aspects were utilised, including brise soleils.

However, the most significant contribution to Brazilian modernism is to be found in the open ground floor of the ministry. Here a minor change was undertaken — one not foreseen in Le Corbusier's sketches but that would have an enormous impact on the dynamics of the surrounding urban space. What was originally planned was a passageway with four-and-a-half-metre-high columns as a pedestrian access route to the square behind. According to reports, it was Oscar Niemeyer who argued that the columns be raised. With this, the high-rise slab was lifted further up and the mass of the pilotis more than doubled. The effect is striking, whereby the plan alone hardly does justice to the resulting impact. It is only when one stands underneath the building, or even better if one approaches the open plinth from the street or the square, that the significance of this ostensibly tiny alteration becomes truly apparent. The overly raised ceiling of the passage between the two urban settings creates more than

simply a connection between two spaces. Instead the spatial sequence around the building becomes a single, huge urban scene and the airy space beneath the tower harmoniously blends in to become one of the most beautiful roofed urban squares in the whole of architectural history. It is serendipity that the proposed building site remained where it was in the city centre, thereby providing the stage for an urban *tour de force*. And, almost as an afterthought, a solution to one of modernism's perpetual dilemmas was found: how can towers or free-standing buildings, intended in the spirit of modernism as free volumes in space, hold their own in traditionally conglomerate urban surroundings? This is a question that concerns not only the urban silhouette but also the immediate vicinities — the city at eye level — to which the ministry building provides a consummate and ideal response. Moreover, it did not remain the only example of its kind, instead reappearing as a leitmotif throughout Brazilian modernism. To give two examples: Lina Bo Bardi's art museum in São Paulo, which with a daring static gesture covers the former belvedere on Avenida Paulista; and only a few metres away, Paulo Mendes da Rocha skilfully and surgically cut through the base of Rino Levi's tower to create an astonishing urban space connecting Avenida Paulista with the lower lying Alameda Santos.

A glance at the decoration of the space underneath the ministry tower reveals further extraordinary elements that would later become characteristic of Brazilian modernism. The exterior walls of the base are covered in ceramic tiles — a monumental mural by the Brazilian painter Cândido Portinari evoking the nearby sea and its living inhabitants with a joyful ease and a nod to the ornamentation of Brazilian baroque churches. The roof garden of the lateral wing is where landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx created one of his first works. The garden is redolent with the feeling of an abstract painting, with the flowers daubed as patches of colour. This and other projects by Burle Marx positioned Brazil at the forefront of landscape architecture. Last but not least, the curved exterior facade of the lecture hall

is throned by Jacques Lipchitz's sculpture *Prometheus Unbound*. In total, the interior and the exterior are a showcase of commissioned works by contemporary artists — art and architecture fused to create an ideal whole.

Seen in terms of both urban planning and design, the building defies orthodox modernism. There is no knee-jerk aversion to the ornamental or the decorative. On the contrary: traditional patterns are readily adopted, thus forging a bond to history and the existing historical surroundings. To take the example of Portinari's mural, ceramic tiling originates from Portugal, but even there is part of a convoluted 'colonial heritage' that runs far deeper. Tile-making techniques were passed on as a part of the centuries of Arab rule over the Iberian Peninsula. From there it reached Brazil with the colonisers, where it took on — like many other 'imports' — its own expressions, forms, and patterns. In the course of the Brazilian baroque the Arab-Iberian heritage assumed its tropical manifestation, only then, with the ministry building, to be naturally transported into the architecture of modernism.

Ceramic tiles are not the only elements to emerge from Portugal's Moorish past. Wooden latticework, the *muxarabis*, was another adoption, refined to become a variation of the brise soleil. Serving primarily in Arab architecture as a visual screen and to protect the intimacy of private rooms, here it was interpreted as a type of sun-shading, varied using innumerable different forms, techniques, and materials. Brise soleils, *muxarabis*, and lattice brickwork are today important means of generating shadows and improving ventilation.

Not far from Rio's city centre are Lúcio Costa's apartment blocks, situated in Guinle Park They are eloquent testimony to how inventively these elements can act to provide privacy and shade. The one example could be multiplied endlessly. Eduardo Reidy also used them in his gargantuan block in Pedregulho to shield against the sun, as have, more recently, the architectural office MMBB for a school campus in Campinas.

The new ministry building was inaugurated in 1943. In the same year the Museum of Modern Art in New York staged the exhibition *Brazil Builds*, accompanied by a book with the same title.[2] The exhibition reached a global audience, making Brazilian architecture instantaneously famous. Prior to this, Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer's Brazilian pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair had already attracted considerable attention, but it was only with the MoMA exhibition that Brazil advanced to represent a beacon of modernism. While in the reissue of his *Space, Time, and Architecture* the architectural theorist and author Sigfried Giedion continued to stress the importance of Finland (and in particular Alvar Aalto) as the prime innovator in architectural modernism,[3] he also accorded Brazil a similar standing, praising both its prominent talents and the farsightedness and resolve of the country's state and private clients in boldly believing in a coming generation of architects.[4]

In hindsight this marked the beginnings of an unparalleled architectural epoch, culminating in the construction of the newly founded capital Brasília, only to then be equally swiftly followed by harsh criticism. The po-faced protagonists of European modernism took exception to the new architecture as formalistic — the exuberant freely curved forms, the expressive columns, were too frivolous for their tastes. These critiques were often obtuse, with the architecture and its architects being tarred with problems that were not of a formal nature but rather had social or political roots. As meteorically as it had burst onto the world's stage, Brazil then just as dramatically and unfairly disappeared from the architectural landscape again for many years to come.

To return to our example. As coincidence would have it, at the same time as the MoMA exhibition, there stood the newly

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2 Philip L. Goodwin, *Brazil Builds: Architecture New and Old, 1652–1942* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1943).

3 Sigfried Giedeon, *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*, 3rd enlarged ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956).

4 Sigfried Giedeon, preface, in Henrique E. Mindlin, *Neues Bauen in Brasilien* (Munich: Georg D.W. Callwey, 1956), pp. ix–x.

completed ministry building, witness to Brazil's pioneering spirit and the awakening of modernism. But precisely what had happened to Le Corbusier's sketched proposal? The sequence of the drawings shows the Brazilian architects' appropriative transformation of the specifications drawn up by the European mentor. As an ingenious exploiter of foreign 'loot', Le Corbusier possessed an uncanny ability to absorb impulses from around him and reiterate them as his own. A predator par excellence![5] And yet this time it was him who fell prey to precisely the same fate! The group of young architects took his idea and transformed it into an entirely original object. The carnivorous predator had met his match.

In order to fully understand this metamorphosis it is worth casting a glance further back to 1922 to the *Semana de Arte Moderna* in São Paulo mentioned at the outset. The cultural week held in the city theatre encompassed all the arts: painting, sculpture, architectural models, poetry, theatre and concerts. The *Semana de Arte Moderna* was an avant-garde endeavour, with many of the contributions revolving about the question of distinct, specific Brazilian forms of expression. The artist Tarsila do Amaral created an iconic painting depicting a human figure. Its title *Aboporú* means 'the human that ate people' in the language of the Indigenous Tupí. Amaral's picture inspired the poet, author, and playwright Oswaldo de Andrade to pen the 'Cannibalist Manifesto'[6] In it he explores the image of the cannibal who acquires his power by devouring his enemies. This syncretic vision mirrors the self-perception of a culture that absorbs everything foreign only to then regurgitate it as its own. There is no trace of aversion or even rejection vis-à-vis their own colonial legacy. On the contrary, the cannibal annihilates

5 André Corboz gave a talk titled 'Le Corbusier, das Raubtier' (Le Corbusier, the predator) during a series of lectures on Le Corbusier at ETH Zurich. See Franz Oswald and Werner Oechslin, eds., *Le Corbusier im Brennpunkt: Vorträge an der Abteilung für Architektur ETHZ* (Zurich: vdf, 1988), pp. 8–19.

6 The 'Manifesto Antropófago' by Oswaldo de Andrade was published in 1928 in the journal *Revista de Antropofagia*, which he himself founded.

everything he encounters and then exploits it to create something new. What an audacious vision! And that at a time when entire nations and peoples in Europe became consumed by the madness of racial and cultural purity, and by violently asserting their own identity over that of others set off one of the greatest catastrophes in human history.

The year of the 'Cannibalist Manifesto' also marks the appearance of a novel by the author Mário de Andrade with the title *Macunaíma: The Hero with No Character*, a similarly daring and subversive work that had a comparable impact to the text of his unrelated namesake Oswaldo de Andrade.[7] The story also describes a hero who mocks traditional morals, exercising a fascinating yet disturbing appeal that still echoes today. As such the author described the hero of his novel in a letter, outlining his lack of character as the distinguishing quality of Brazil as a whole:

> What interested me about Macunaíma was to discover the national unity that Brazilians share. After a long struggle, one thing became apparent to me: the Brazilian has no character. With the word 'character' I mean not only an ethical reality, but rather the permanent psychological being that expresses itself in everything — in the customs, the behavioural habits, in the feelings, in the language, the history, in both the good and the evil.

In essence, Mário de Andrade argued, the Brazilian resembles a twenty-year-old, caught on the threshold between youth and maturity, with a tendency to resort to improvisation.[8] A

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7 Mário de Andrade, *Macunaíma, o herói sem nenhum caráter* (São Paulo: Oficinas Gráficas de Eugênio Cupolo, 1928).

8 The letter is reprinted in the translator's epilogue to *Macunaíma: Der Held ohne jeden Charakter*, trans. by Curt Meyer-Clason (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2013). The extended quote reads: 'The Brazilian has no character, because he lacks both his own civilisation and a sense of tradition. The French possess character, as do the Yorubas, the Mexicans. Perhaps these peoples have

provocative thesis; but also an enticing one, in the sense that it invites us to invent ourselves. With the cannibal, with Macunaíma and Aboporú, new figures emerged that to date were unimaginable — the descendants of Brazil's Indigenous culture as messengers for a return to the origins, noticeably devoid of a nostalgia for or a romanticisation, or for that matter denial, of the colonial past. Macunaíma, the son of an Indigenous mother, changes the colour of his skin while bathing. Not only is he devoid of character, the visible signs of his ethnicity are also fickle.

Whether the twenty-year-old grew up or whether he remained suspended in a state of semi-animation is neither here nor there. But this spirit of improvisation and of 'inventing oneself' would nevertheless appear to be constant aspects of Brazil's existence. What Andrade writes about his hero is more than intellectual self-reflection; instead it goes to the very heart of Brazil's everyday culture. No one has been able to fathom this so revealingly and precisely than the Italian-Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi. She too came over the Atlantic on board a ship to a land that was entirely other than war-torn Europe. With the open-minded eye of the outsider she explored the world of Brazilian folk art. '*Cultura do lixo*', the culture of rubbish, she called it, referring to Brazil's specific craft culture of making utensils and commodities out of what could be found. The newly born state had no medieval craft guilds, no master craftsmen who could pass down their knowledge and skills over generations. Even the country's industrialisation was imported, and its products unaffordable to most. And so, inventive and unaffected as they were, Brazil's craftspeople set about creating new things out of what was to hand — from today's perspective, a joyous and durable form of recycling. Lina Bo Bardi resolutely rejected the

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character by having contributed to their own civilisations, due to imminent threats and centuries of consciousness. Not so the Brazilian. He is like a twenty-year-old: one can perceive general tendencies in him, but nothing concrete. This lack of psychological character leads to our lack of ethical character — and above all our existence based on improvised solutions.'

idea that there was a difference between high art and folk art. For her the suggestion was illogical — a mark of a redundant bourgeois mindset that had nothing in common with the reality of the young country.

The concept of the cannibal is therefore more than simply an intellectual conceit — it encapsulates the essence of an entire culture. The Ministry of Education and Health marks the beginning of this key development for Brazil and an extraordinary exhibit of exchange and absorption, in turn perhaps describable as the search for independent identity. The result of this quest remains open and individual identity perhaps only a phantom. That said, faced with today's ideological battle lines and vehement answers, fantasy and questions that remain open are more vital than ever. And a far more interesting promise for the future. Concerning cultural appropriation and the question of who has claims to which cultural means and traits, the concept of the cannibal could be an interesting alternative, and in the glance backwards to the past an invitation for the future.

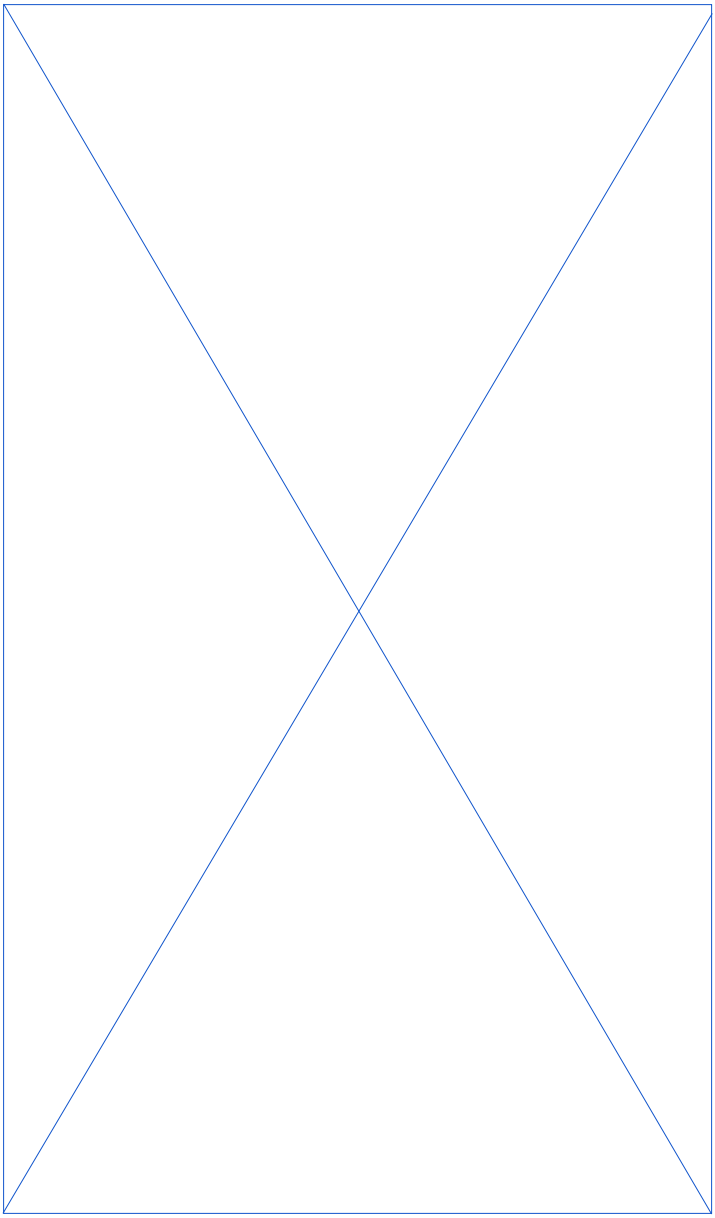

Fig. 1. Emiliano Di Cavalcanti, cover image for the catalogue *Semana de Arte Moderna*, São Paulo (1922).

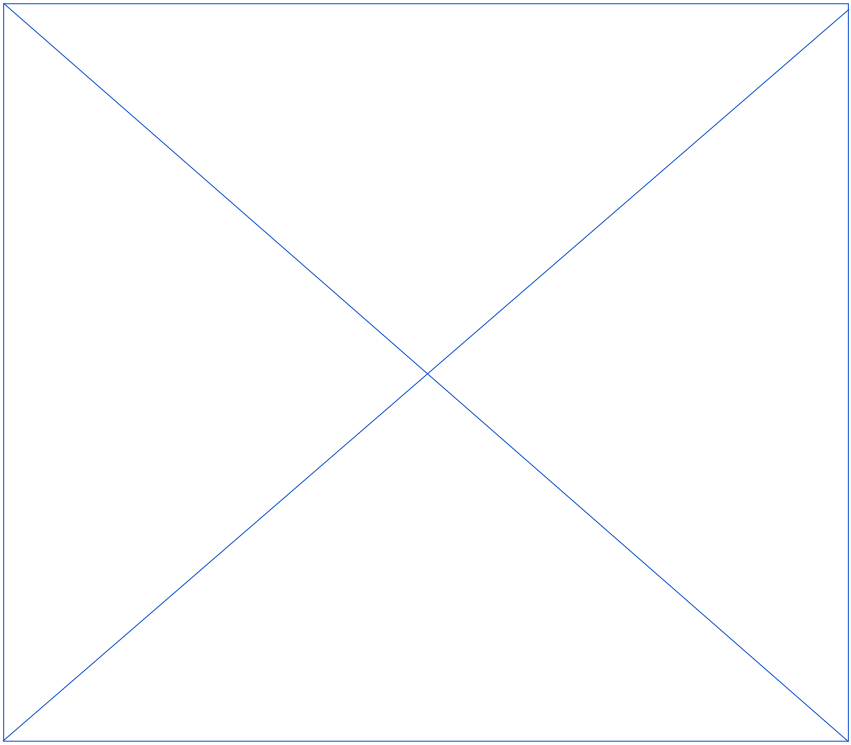

Fig. 2. Le Corbusier, Le Corbusier and Josephine Baker in Rio de Janeiro (1929). From Le Corbusier, *Carnet B 4*, no. 239.

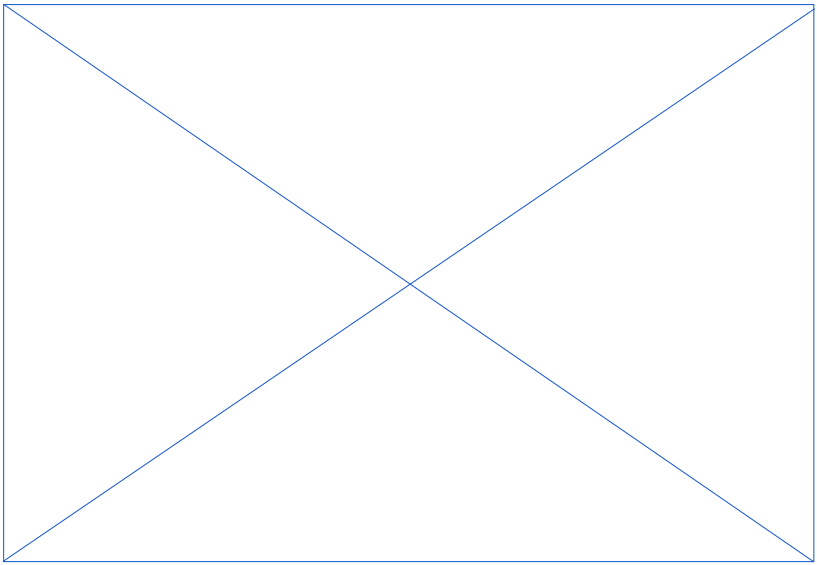

Fig. 3. An aerial view. From Le Corbusier, *Aircraft* (The Studio Publications, 1935).

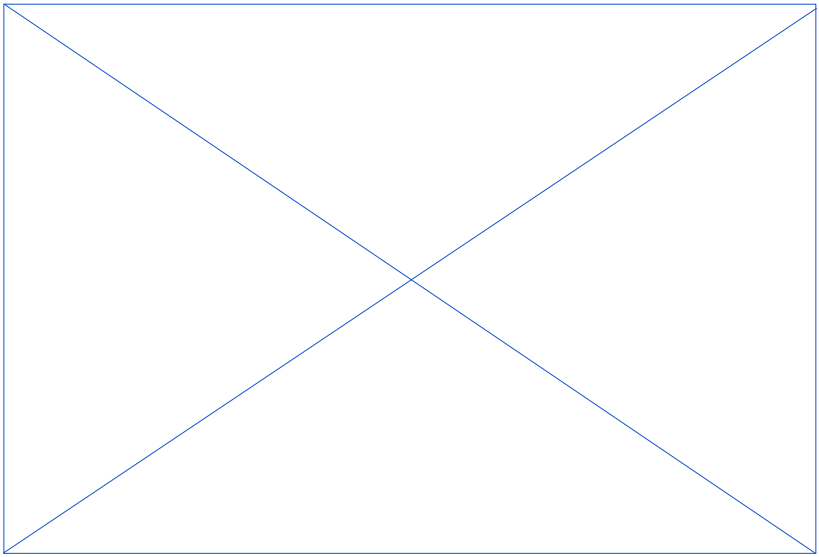

Fig. 4. Le Corbusier, Aerial Sketch at Departure Time from Bogota (September 1950). From Le Corbusier, *Carnet C 16*, no. 208.

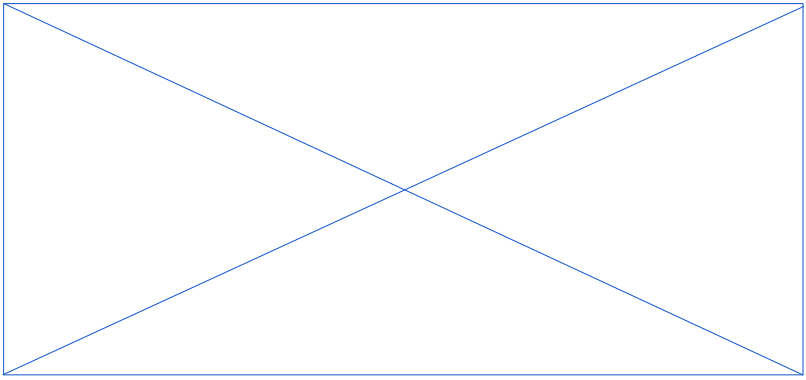

Fig. 5. Le Corbusier, Sketch for a Modern Airport (1946). From Le Corbusier, *Œuvre complète, 1938–46*, p. 199.

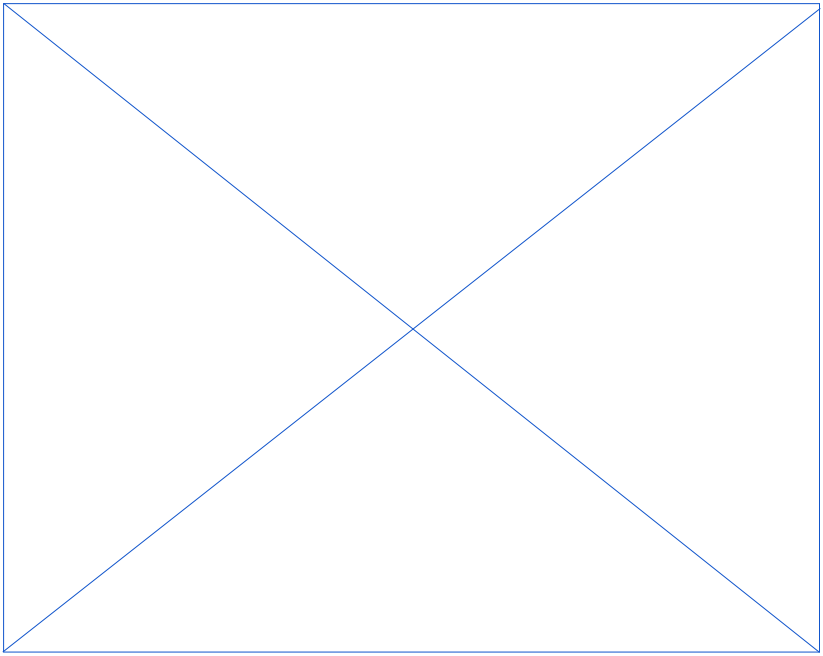

Fig. 6. Le Corbusier, Proposal for the Pilot Plan of Rio de Janeiro (1936).

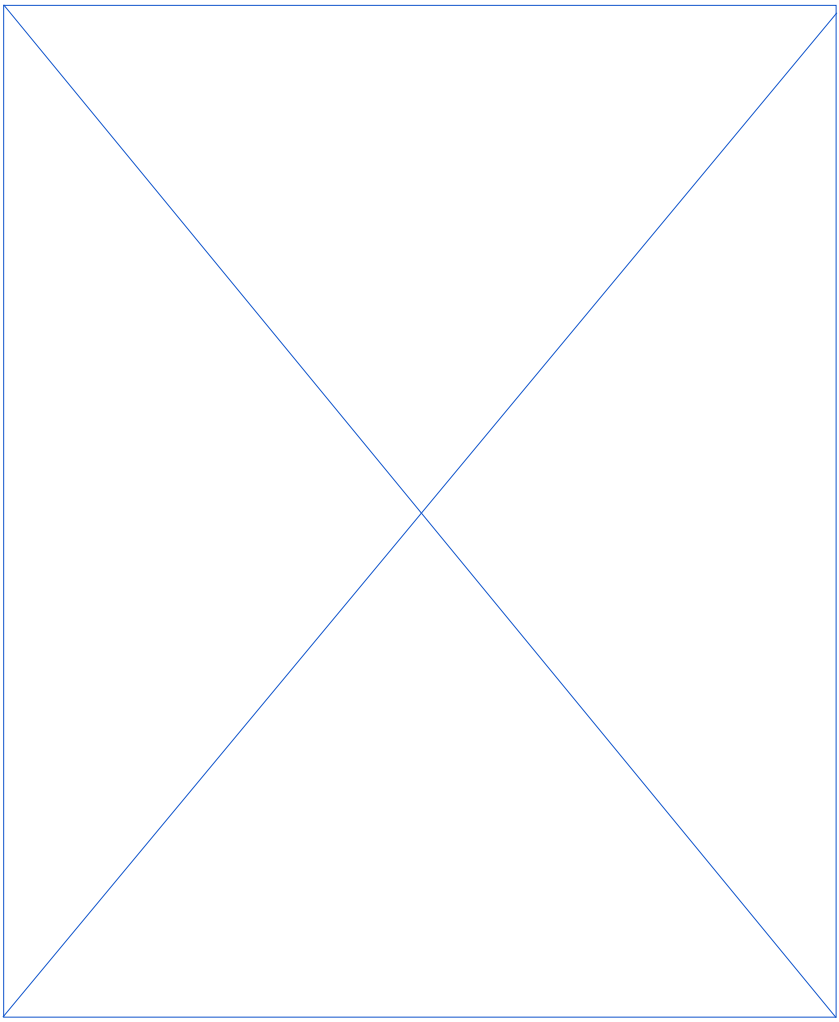

Fig. 7. Development of the designs for the Ministry of Education and Health, Rio de Janeiro, 1936–37: a) sketch by Lucio Costa's group, b) Le Corbusier's sketch for the building complex near the airport, c) Le Corbusier's sketch for the current complex, d) final sketch by the Brazilian group. From Henrique E. Mindlin, *Neues Bauen in Brasilien* (Callwey, 1956).

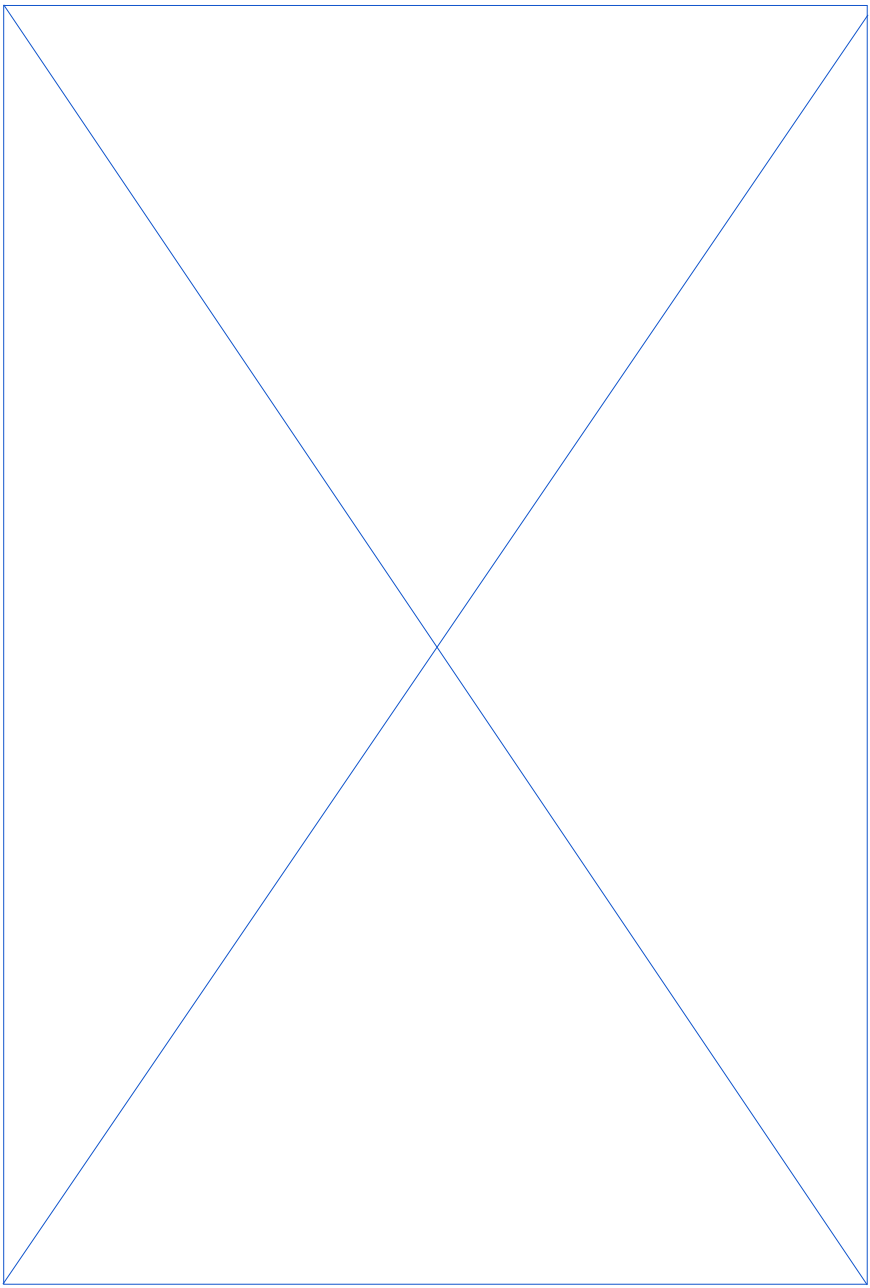

Fig. 8. Le Corbusier, diagram of the Ministry of Education and Health on the present site, Rio de Janeiro (1936), and diagram of the present project from the Brazilian architects, from Henrique E. Mindlin, *Neues Bauen in Brasilien* (Callwey, 1956).

Fig. 9. Ministry of Education and Health (1937). Photograph taken by Annette Spiro.

Fig. 10. Ministry of Education and Health (1937). Photograph taken by Stephan Gantenbein.

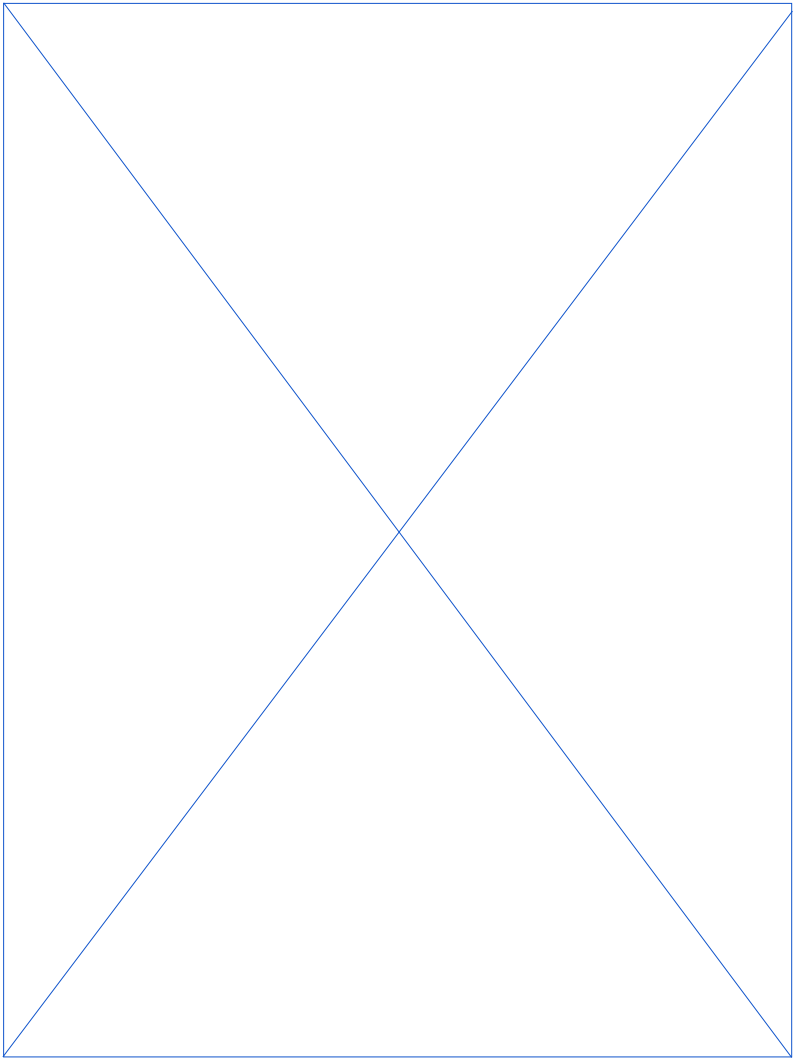

Fig. 11. G. E. Kidder Smith, Ministry of Education and Health, photograph. From Philip L. Goodwin, *Brazil Builds* (Museum of Modern Art, 1943).

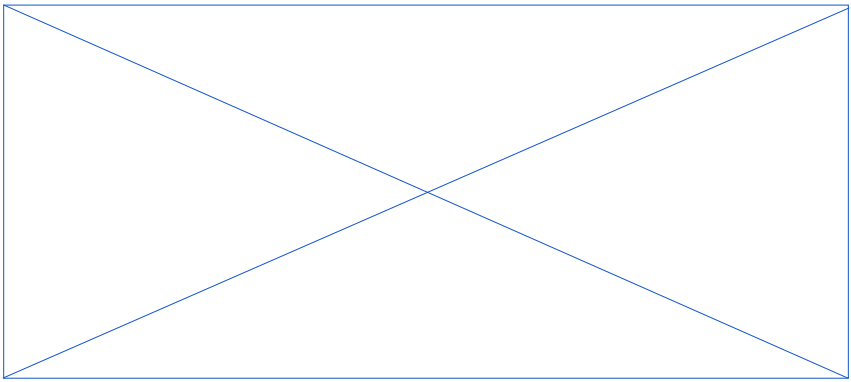

Fig. 12. Roberto Burle Marx, plan for the roof garden of the Ministry of Education and Health (1937).

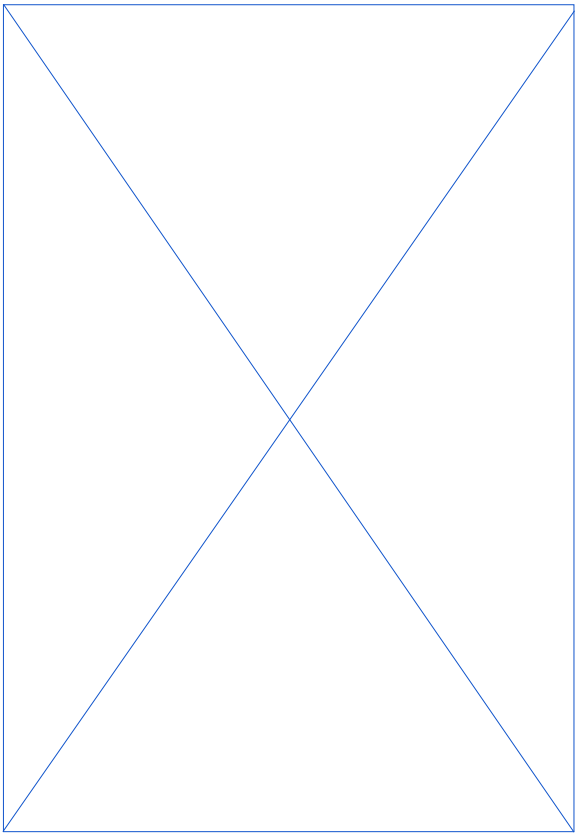

Fig. 13. From *Revista de Antropofagia*, 1.1 (1 May 1928).

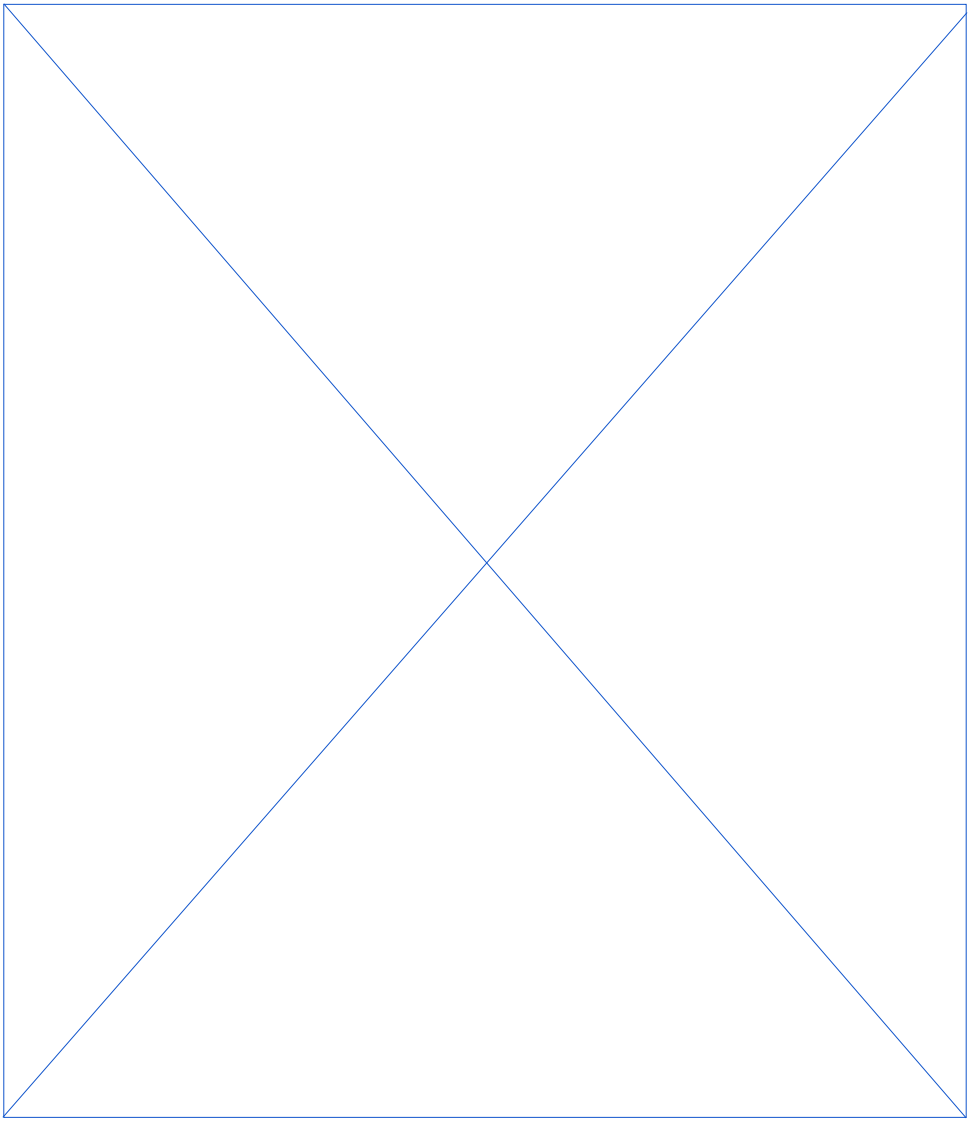

Fig. 14. Tarsila do Amaral, *Abaporu* (1928), oil on canval, 85 × 73 cm. Collection MALBA, Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires.