

Comment

Pedro BRANCANTE

Embassy of Brazil in Tokyo



This short presentation is part of an exercise we are doing at the Embassy of Brazil in Tokyo to revise and report on the architecture-related cultural activities we have been putting in place in the last few years. As Andrea said, unfortunately, at the last minute the Ambassador could not come. I am not an Ambassador and I am not an architectural critic as he is, and his comment would certainly be of great interest to this audience, but I hope you will bear with me.

I am the head of cultural affairs at the Embassy and a historian by training. I did some research on urban planning for my master degree, related to Muslim immigration to France in the second half of the XX century. As you all know, the social housing issue has been at the heart of the debates on assimilation and segregation of migrant communities in Europe (and elsewhere).

My job at the embassy is to promote Brazilian culture in Japan, by promoting collaboration and the establishment of ties between Brazilian and Japanese artists and cultural institutions. The main challenge is to diversify and update the current perception on what Brazil is, how Brazilians live and what sort of culture and lifestyle is unique to the country. Japan loves many aspects of the Brazilian culture, notably, music, with Bossa Nova, and many other well known aspects of Brazil, like the passion for football; carnival; nature and the Amazon etc. All of those are genuine features of Brazil and there is a very sympathetic view in general, but it is somehow a very limited understanding of what the Brazilian culture is. This is a common phenomenon happening not only for Brazil in Japan, but for many foreign cultures in different countries (the

same is true for Japan in Brazil). Even today in a hyper connected world the reality is that people still tend to have a very shortsighted vision and knowledge about other cultures.

So one of our main objectives is to establish long lasting partnerships between cultural institutions in Brazil and in Japan aiming that one day our work will become redundant, that there will be no need for cultural offices in Embassies because the artists and cultural institutions themselves will do this job in much better ways.

What we do concretely is to organize exhibitions, concerts and cultural events both at the embassy space and in other venues in Japan. We also share information about events related to Brazilian culture that are taking place in Japan, but which are not directly organized by the embassy. In the last 3 years we put together a broad range of artistic and cultural expressions. This graffiti is in the embassy façade and it was made by a famous Brazilian street artist, Eduardo Kobra (Fig.1). This other image is an open air concert to celebrate in Japan the 100 years of samba. It is very unusual to have open air concerts in Japan, but in Brazil it is a very important feature of our culture and we tried hard to organize this festival in a public space in Tokyo. It might look like a small detail (doing it in a open air format), but it features what we want to show: everyone knows about Brazilian music, but they are listening to it inside a club, and in Brazil we live music everywhere, and we specially enjoy it outdoors. Sometimes we mix everything up and this is a graffiti and music event in front of the embassy, where you are all invited to join if you come to Tokyo.



Fig.1 The graffiti by Eduardo Kobra

Now getting to architecture: through architecture it is possible to show one of the major aspects of what we call Brazilian lifestyle. And this is a concept that we want to promote more. We realized that the modern Brazilian architecture and its masters like Oscar Niemeyer were known by architects and scholars but are mostly unknown by the general public. Maybe people have heard about him but they do not identify him with buildings, with thoughts, specific movements, specific concepts and aesthetics and we went through some basic research about what has happened in relation to the Brazilian architecture in Japan. It was very disappointing to learn that for the last decades we have had very few shows or events related to Brazilian architecture in Japan.

There was mainly one exhibition about Oscar Niemeyer in 1996 at the Toto Gallery which is a very good space dedicated to architecture in Tokyo, but a small one. The exhibition was very good, but had a small impact for the general public. It was still concentrated on the specialized public.

We then decided to organize more architectural exhibitions, and we brought up three major ones. This image is from the first, dedicated to Oscar Niemeyer, since he was the major figure in Brazilian Modern architecture (Fig.2). We teamed up with the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, and the Niemeyer Foundation, to produce the first-ever large scale exhibition about his work in Asia.

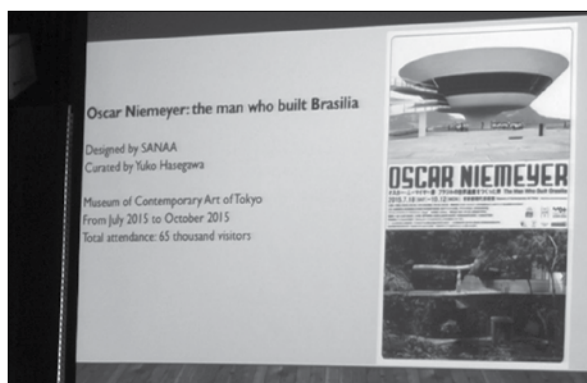


Fig.2 The exhibition of Oscar Niemeyer

One thing that we are always concerned with is how to show Brazil in a way that the Japanese public will relate to it. Because we do not want to come and tell stories that will overdose people with information. We want people to feel comfortable and attached to it, to have an experience of the Brazilian culture while enjoying it and having a good time.

You can see in this short video (2minutes) about the Niemeyer Show in the Museum of Contempo-

rary Art of Tokyo what I'm talking about. Basically as a first ever show in Asia it becomes necessary to go through all of his vast work in a more or less chronological way, highlighting his main works. At the beginning we included very simple presentations with good pictures and good models, and all the models were built in Japan by an amazing architect called Noguchi Naoto. We decided to insert some of the monumentality of Niemeyer's work so this is an almost four meters high model of the Brasília Cathedral. It was very impressive, people could walk around it and really have the feeling of the presence of the building due to the scale of the model. You can see some original drawings; the next room is the most important one: in this 500 square meters room the exhibition designers, the architects Sejima Kazuyo and Nishizawa Ryue from SANAA and the curator Hasegawa Yuko decide to create this giant model of Ibirapuera park, in São Paulo, which features many building by Niemeyer.

In every project that we do, we try to have very good Japanese artists and intellectuals collaborating, curating or translating the Brazilian architecture or the Brazilian arts to the Japanese public. It is a way to establish a better connection between the public and the exhibition contents.

People might question why we did not invite a Brazilian curator to do the exhibition, but we thought it was very important to work with Japanese curators and designers so that they can translate Niemeyer's work over the XX century to current Japanese public, specially the young. For example, in this room people can experience a Niemeyer building and feel cozy, thus it is very important to take your shoes off. In Brazil it is basically the opposite, if people take their shoes off in an exhibition they will get embarrassed, not like it and probably gonna have a bad time. But here in Japan we really dive into a more sensorial experience because you normally take your shoes off. That is true even for restaurants and everywhere else. For this model of the Ibirapuera Park we printed high-resolution google earth images in the carpet as in an aerial view of the park, then you have the models built over it, and people could walk, lay down on the floor, read a book – just as if they were in the real Ibirapuera park! (Fig.3)

The exhibition was visited by 65 thousands people between July and October 2015, it was a record breaking number of visitors for architecture and design related shows in the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo.



Fig.3 The model of the Ibirapuera Park

Then we had the exhibition on Lina Bo Bardi in a smaller but great contemporary art Museum in Tokyo, the Watari-um. I was, though, a much more artistic exhibition again with the collaboration of Sejima Kazuyo and the museum curator Watari Etsuko. This exhibition has been touring universities in southern Japan since it finished in March 2016. It actually came to Kyoto for a very short period at the Kyoto Art and Design University, to Nagoya and it is now in Okayama. These are some pictures of the exhibition.

The most recent one was about Paulo Mendes da Rocha, this one not so artistic, it's more like a pure architecture exhibition, that happened at the GA Gallery (Tokyo). I selected this image to show the importance of this type of activity: this is the Brazilian pavilion at the Osaka 70 Expo; it was designed by Paulo Mendes da Rocha, he had won a national competition and came to Japan to build it. At that time it was a very impressive pavilion and Paulo stayed in Japan for a month and a half. There were some videos at the exhibition talking about this experience and how this dialogue between his work and Japanese construction companies was interesting for his career. But also it is part of a historical recovery, because this is the first time that a model of that building was ever done after the original one. And this happened at the same time that he won the Praemium Imperiale, which is the most prestigious award in architecture in Japan. While preparing for this exhibition he was also awarded the Venice Biennale Golden Lion. Later he was announced to receive this year's RIBA Award, that together with his Pritzker Prize received a few years before, this collection of prizes made him one of the three most prized architects in the world, the other two being Rem Koolhaas and Alvaro Siza.

We were impressed because he is now one of the most prized architects in the world, but frankly

speaking very few people know about him in Japan. He is still alive and active, but talking to his office during the preparation for this exhibition his assistants were saying something related to the work that prof. Maluenda and Caramelino are doing. They said the first ever monograph produced about Mendes da Rocha outside of Brazil was published in the 1980s. At that time he was already almost 60 years old. He has done most of his interesting works in Brazil and he is still pretty much a very national architect somehow. He has been recognized and highly recognized in Brazilian architecture academic environment but there was a general lack of international recognition. And there are many theories about why this happened but the question is, as prof. Segawa was saying that there was and there is a general lack of publications. And this is also relevant in the discussion related to the creation of databases etc... But nowadays not only we have much more information available, but also we have better ways to show it and an expedite knowledge about what has been done elsewhere around the world. So to finalize this talk I would like to announce that we are now preparing a fourth one starting in May at Archi-Depot Museum about Brazilian modern architecture, reuniting the models from the three previous exhibitions.

In the future we have plans to show other architects also, but we are now discussing the idea to make this material digitalized and make it available to the public because it was tailor made for the Japanese public. We have all the texts and information in Japanese and this is not common. We are having discussions on how to do it. Basically there are three main challenges: first it was not meant from the beginning to become digital, there are some blind spots in order to really make it like a virtual exhibition that you can run through. The second challenge, the resources for culture in Brazil were never high and specially now it is getting harder and harder to find funds to do it. Moreover, there is a resistance from the part of institutions that fund cultural activities for funding online or database type of projects because normally culture used to be presented in a more physical way and that is a relevant challenge. And the third one is something we've been discussing from sometime now in this symposium that is how to make people actually make use of these digital databases and digital exhibitions, in a context when you have too much information available online and so many sources that can be consulted through your smartphone.