2010

Picturing Buildings through Niemeyer

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Publication Details
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Abstract
In the city of Niterói, just a short ferry ride from Rio proper, the Museu de Arte Contemporânea peeks out from the nondescript cityscape, a jumble of luxury high-rises, working-class bairros, and semi-anonymous megaplex shopping malls along the polluted beaches of Guanabara Bay. But for all these tourist attractions, Niterói’s reputation rests instead on its assortment of buildings designed by legendary architect Oscar Niemeyer that pop-up throughout the city.

Arguably none is more iconic than the home of the Museu de Arte Contemporânea, perched on a green escarpment overlooking the water on a single thick pillar, the round white structure with its ethereally snakey entrance ramp, looks and is sited so much like a UFO that it’d be silly to describe it otherwise (and no cursory account really does). The building was completed in 1996, which makes it only slightly less strange, than if it had been built in Neimeyer’s ’60s Brasilia heyday.

Keywords
niemeyer, buildings, picturing

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

This journal article is available at Research Online: http://ro.uow.edu.au/lhapapers/1709
In the city of Niterói, just a short ferry ride from Rio proper, the Museu de Arte Contemporânea peeks out from the nondescript cityscape, a jumble of luxury high-rises, working-class *bairros*, and semi-anonymous megaplex shopping malls along the polluted beaches of Guanabara Bay. But for all these tourist attractions, Niterói’s reputation rests instead on its assortment of buildings designed by legendary architect Oscar Neimeyer that pop-up throughout the city. Arguably none is more iconic than the home of the Museu de Arte Contemporânea, perched on a green escarpment overlooking the water on a single thick pillar, the round white structure with its ethereally snakey entrance ramp, looks and is sited so much like a UFO that it’d be silly to describe it otherwise (and no cursory account really does). The building was completed in 1996, which makes it only slightly less strange, than if it had been built in Neimeyer’s ’60s Brasilia heyday.
Like much concept architecture (think Frank Gehry’s treacherous curvilinear roofs on the Fisher Center against the snows of Bard or Frank Lloyd Wright’s Guggenheim Museum which still occasionally causes bemused headscratching when installations need stretch somehow over its curved walls), this building, if analyzed thoroughly, is really not a form-meets-function kind of joint. Frankly, it’s a downright terrible place to see art, and not for the reasons that you might think. The museum has constructed a trapezoidal set of floating interior walls that ensure flat surfaces for hanging art, leaving the curved glass outer skin and accompanying ring-shaped window seat for unadulterated contemplation of the 360 degree vistas, meaning there are lots of nice, flat walls along with the view.

Something about the humid tropical climate, wall-to-wall carpeting, and hermetic, ring-seal of the building makes for a rather fetid, steamy affair, with the photographs warping and windows steaming up if too many bodies close in.

A few sentences on this spacey Niemeyer building gives preamble to the exhibition on view within the precincts of this somewhat failed architecture (that is if you measure success in building by their useful program as opposed to its resemblance to intergalactic transport). But the Museu seems to know that people don’t come for the art and they curate accordingly. Currently, the space-museum has two exhibitions on display. The first is an exhibition of photography, ostensibly about alienation in places Neimeyer has worked, titled “Retratos de Cidades (Pictures of Cities): Le Havre – Brasilia – Niterói,” while the other is an exhibition of Brazilian art curated from the permanent collection.

The highlights of the photography exhibition are the earliest images, black and white photos taken by Lucien Hervé, of Brasilia when it was still under construction in 1961, as well as some of his images from French city of Le Havre designed and rebuilt following the war by Auguste Perret and his studio in 1956. Hervé’s famous for his severe photographs of modernist architecture, especially his long term relationship with modernist architecture demi-god, Le Corbusier. These pictures attempt to compare the idea of architecture’s ability to build anew, and like
both cities and this museum perched in Niteroi, create new landmarks, even if their function as buildings is sometimes debatable.

While the more recent images of Brasilia in the exhibition are certainly more colorful, such as those of George Dupin from 2005, it looked like they worked to illustrate the parched weirdness of that place in a way that Hervé’s images simply just capture the stark, windswept city that Brazilians seem to love. Niemeyer's reputation stands untarnished (though I might add also unburnished by this temple's hagiography), even if he himself might molt in the heat of his own building. And all hero-worshipping aside, including that of an exhibition about Niemeyer through Hervé and others, there's still this iconic space-ship perched over the city, ready to take off into moon-age tropicalia at any moment.

- Liz Linden, artist living in New York