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How did Lina Bo Bardi redefine public space with the SESC Pompeia?

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SESC Pompéia - Lina Bo Bardi

How Did Lina Bo Bardi Redefine Public Space with SESC Pompéia?

What makes a public space truly public? Is it open access, democratic design, or the way people interact with it? In an era where many urban spaces are shaped by commercial interests, Lina Bo Bardi's SESC Pompéia stands as a radical reimagining of what public space can be. By transforming a decommissioned factory into a dynamic cultural and social hub, Bo Bardi challenged conventional architectural norms, proving that spaces should be shaped by their users rather than dictated by rigid design principles.

Born in Italy, blossomed in Brazil.

The SESC Pompéia estate was opened on the 22nd of January 1982, this only included the old drum factory spaces but the second phase of the concrete towers then opened in 1986. The client for this project was the SESC (Serviço Social do Comércio), a Brazilian non-profit institution focused on providing cultural, educational, sports and social programs for workers in the commerce sector. SESC commissioned Lina Bo Bardi in the late 1970s to begin the project that lasted 9 years. Phase 1 consisted of the repurposed factory buildings (housing the cultural and social spaces. Additionally phase 2 was the concrete sports towers.



Figure 1: Lina Bo Bardi (Casati, 2021)

This essay explores how SESC Pompéia redefined public space through inclusivity, adaptive reuse, and participatory design.

Lina Bo Bardi

Bo Bardi was born in 1914, to a Genoese family in Rome. Few women at this time attended school, especially from the financial background of Bo Bardi. Yet even fewer attempted to break the gendered glass ceiling of the architectural field. She relocated to Milan at 26, due to concerns over the political stability of Rome during and the rise of Mussolini's fascism.

At 28 she opened her own practice in Milan, but the lack of work due to the war led Bo Bardi to do other jobs like illustration and being the deputy director of Domus magazine, (Architecture Foundation, 2024). She was, and still is, well known for her illustrations. Often doubted by clients and professors within her education for her 'real' architectural credibility, additionally the fact that she was a young single woman at the time, (Lima, 21AD). Her drawings were very playful and light, later reflected within her architectural style. She enjoyed interplay of everyday life and the ironically unlikely within her design visions and her physical work.

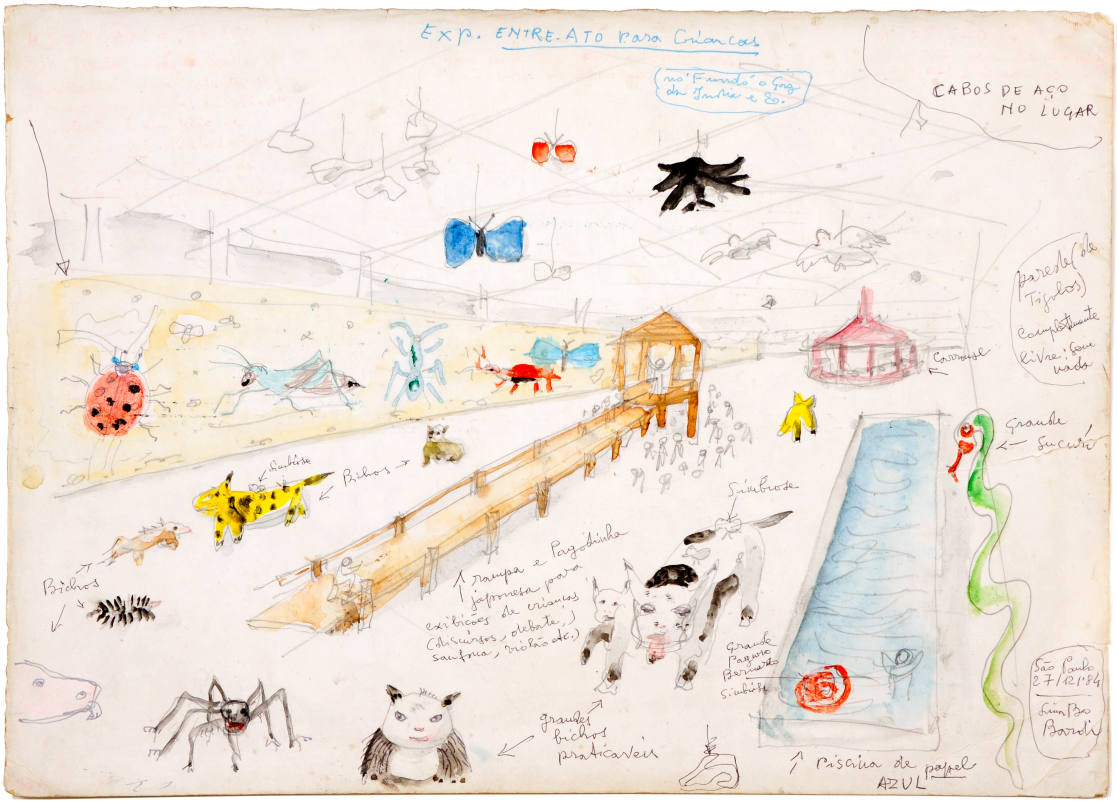


Figure 2: Drawing from Bo Bardi's early work. (Serapião, 2019)

Whilst in Milan she collaborated with Giò Ponti, an Italian architect, furniture designer, artist, teacher and writer, on the publication '*Stile'* further contributing to a multitude of other magazines on design topics. Six years later

she returned to Rome with her partner Pietro Maria Bardi. After the couple married, they took their trip to Rio de Janeiro and never looked back.

In 1951, Lina Bo Bardi was naturalised as a Brazilian citizen, five years after initially entering Brazil with her husband as a haven from postwar Italy, welcomed by the IAB (Institute of Brazilian Architects) she quickly established her practice, (HENI Talks, 2019). Brazil heavily inspired her and opened up her creative spirit, providing her the space to venture into the architecture she had always longed to do. After having experience in running a magazine she and her husband set up 'Habitat'. The magazine's title referenced Bo Bardi's humanist values communicating that the ideal interior is a habitat designed to maximise human potential.

Her first non-collaborative build in Brazil was in 1951, her Casa de Vidro or 'Glass House' which shows remnants of Italian rationalism striking a middle ground between the grandeur of classicism and the contemporary futuristic Italian values, (Instituto Bardi, 2012). According to the research of (ArchEyes Team, 2016) she stayed living there with her husband for four decades.



Figure 3: View of the main facade of the Glass House; (Kon, 2001)

Throughout her career she quickly established herself as one of the eminent female competitors in the male dominated modern architecture movement. Gestalten (2020) discussed that it was an unparalleled accomplishment for the time. Her seminal building projects are still some of its most beloved and reminisced upon.

She was appointed director of the Museum of Modern Art in Bahia in 1959—an unprecedented appointment for a woman at the time. With her practice taking off, she returned to São Paulo in 1966 and began work on a string of prominent cultural landmarks across the city.

Her magnum opus, the SESC Pompéia, taking nearly a decade to complete and would be her final project before her death in 1992.

The Chair of an Architect

Architects often design chairs for many reasons, usually tied to their broader philosophies on space, form, function and materiality. A chair is often seen like a mini build, or as micro-architecture, leading to architects to experiment with form and function and how the chair is used.



Figure 4: Bardi's Bowl Chair (MOHD, 2021).

Lina Bo Bardi's first chair, The Bowl Chair (1951), is a hemispherical seat set in a lightweight steel frame, the bowl of the seat can be tilted and adjusted for the desired position. Combining industrial production with adaptability, challenging the rigidity of traditional furniture, this is reflected throughout many of her buildings.

The 'Cadeira Girafa' (The Giraffe Chair) released in 1987. This was a tall lightweight wooden chair, simply made and designed, with a curved backrest. It is made of timber with a woven cane seat and was initially designed for the SESC Pompéia, as it embodied simplicity, affordability and artisanal craftsmanship. These chairs also paid homage to the building and the philosophy that came with it as they were lightweight and stackable, lending themselves to the modularity of the overall space. It is a staple of her approach to blending modernism with Brazilian vernacular design.



Figure 5: The Giraffe Chair (ATELIER GALLERY, 2025).

Bo Bardi's chairs were not just furniture; they embodied her belief in democratic design, craftsmanship and cultural identity. Unlike many modernist designers of her time, she valued imperfect, handmade aesthetics, making her work deeply human and accessible.

SESC Pompéia

In 1982, a new dawn opened its doors to the public of São Paulo, the striking architectural landmark of the Centro de Lazer Fábrica da Pompéia (Pompéia Factory Leisure Centre), eventually tagged as the SESC Pompéia building. This was unusual for the time as it was an adaptive reuse, as the project



Figure 6: Aerial View of SESC Pompéia (Kon, 1997).

umbrella's an old drum factory originally built in the 1920's, Bo Bardi took this and adjacently added three huge concrete towers, connected by external aerial walkways. Most would say its unconventional and insensitive, but this project proves that "brutalism could have a beating heart and maybe even a soul" (MidMod, 2024).

When Lina Bo Bardi carried out a site visit to the old metal drum factory, originally designed by the French, François Hennebique, planning to build a sports and culture centre, not only did she understand the proportions of the building, so that they were in the style of British factories (ArchEyes Team, 2022) but she understood the natural humanist side of the evolution of the space. Local neighbours had spontaneously occupied the warehouses amidst the industrial complex, (Ferraz, 2012). Therefore Bo Bardi's priority was to maintain and elevate this space for the neighbourhood to continue pursuing their activities, without demolition.



Figure 7: View from roof of old drum factory, (Impiraressa, 2015).

Bardi's determination to preserve the old factory drastically reduced the space originally imagined. Leaving a small corner of the plot with a central corridor in which the building wasn't permitted due to groundwater issues. Her solution? Two concrete towers housing the stacked sports courts and spaces, spanning between the monolithic projections were prestressed

bridges reaching distances up to 25 metres over the unbuildable areas. If two concrete towers weren't enough, completing the ensemble, a third cylindrical tower rising seventy meters high as a landmark that can be seen for miles, supposedly inviting surrounding citizens to become a part of this *'little joy in a sad city' - Lina Bo Bardi,* HIC Architecture (2024).

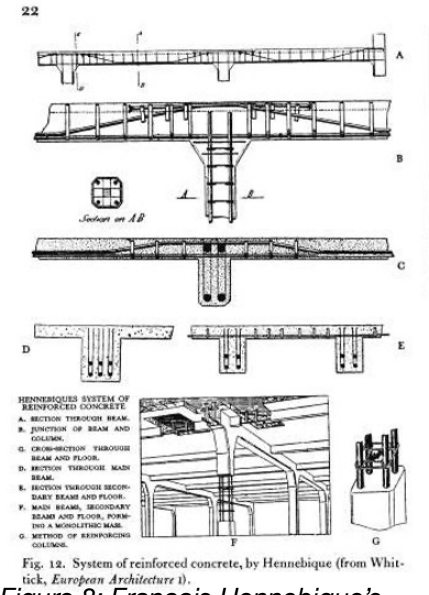


Fig. 12. System of reinforced concrete, by Hennebique (from Whittick, *European Architecture* i).

Figure 8: François Hennebique's Coined Reinforced Concrete, (Sayers, 2019).

François Hennebique, the architect/designer of the original drum factories was a critically acclaimed pioneer of reinforced concrete. For Bo Bardi to come to a conclusion of an adjacent large concrete structure is well considered. The structures in question are made from rough concrete, the harshness of this is alleviated by amoeba like shaped window holes, whilst being extremely course on the immediate surface the facade has a softness to it. Going through the 'Spanish civil war holes', as Bo Bardi enjoyed to refer to them as, they were portals to sports facilities like football fields, a swimming pool and a solarium.

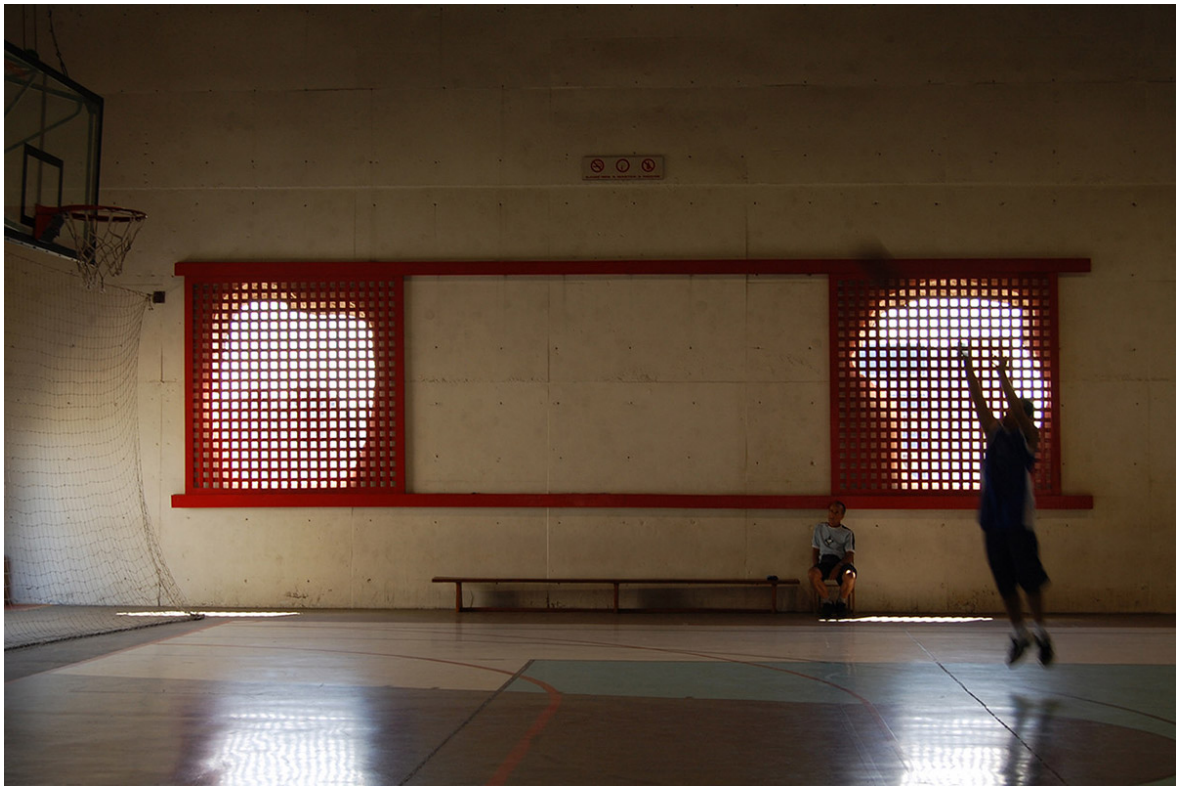


Figure 9: Bo Bardi's Mashrabiya coverings of the 'Spanish civil war holes', (Belitardo, 2020).

The general redesign of the old factory exemplify the use of Mashrabiya into a post modern remix of colonial style elements that reference back to Brazilian popular culture at the time. Paying homage to François Hennebique, Bo Bardi stripped the existing factory back to its original concrete and brick structure, forcing the architecture to be fresh, but still representing the structural tectonics, allowing the program and use of the people to drive the design. Bo Bardi executed Modernism's highest ideals whilst letting her own political and personal values sing so proudly throughout this project of social utopia.

"There is a pleasure in the victory and wonder of being simple." – Lina Bo Bardi



Figure 10: Inside Phase 1, (ArchEyes Team, 2022).

Redefinition of Public Space

Through adaptive reuse of the old and new structures blending together, Bo Bardi showed the world, and the modernists, that history didn't need to be erased and flattened for good design, architecture and placemaking to be brought into fruition. The design holistically fosters open and spontaneous social interaction with the utilisation of flexible spaces for arts, leisure and

communal activities. The modular feel of the project redefines the box that a ‘leisure centre’ is normally confined to, by doing this it feels like a space of the people, a space that they can change and adapt themselves allowing it to grow with them. By empowering the public to shape the space Bo Bardi comments on the social construct of state built ‘community’ projects, possibly relating to back to a reactionary response to the fascism and Italian rationalism aesthetic of her past.



Figure 11: Inside Phase 1, Entrance, (Boghossian, 2024).

The building operates with an adaptive use strategy where there is active participation from all in shaping the events and on goings of the collective that use the centre. This type of hands on participatory approach further



Figure 12: Bardi’s Sectional Drawing Including Circulation, (Stefanvh32, 2021).

encourages the space to evolve overtime making it dynamic rather than a static structure with a ‘named’ purpose. This playfulness with the interaction of the spaces not only increases community engagement and longevity, but it is directly reflected with the general aesthetic of the building. The circulation of the public has been deeply considered here, this can be seen with the four bridges reaching between the towers, seeing as they are not just functional but they create a sense of drama. A pushing and pulling effect from tower to tower. The unspoken but o so obvious sense of movement between these monolithic concrete blocks encouraging people to experience the space in a playful, fun, light fashion. Exactly how Lina Bo Bardi would have wanted. Through this she challenges the traditional separation of different public zones making the circulation of the entire building and estate, it’s own event.



Figure 13: SESC Entrance, (Kon, 2019a).

The diversity of activities and things to do here is immense. The design fosters open and spontaneous interaction between sports, theatre, arts and education whilst being socially inclusive and hierarchy free. Reflected through the materiality of the project, with rough, raw concrete, exposed bricks and industrial elements shows the honesty of the building, there is no ornament. You don’t have to be an expert to guess how this building is standing up and providing you with shelter, because its showing you how, as it’s doing it. This is an unpretentious place, giving the user, whoever they may be, a sense of full accessibility inviting their engagement as opposed to cultivating intimidation.

“Architecture and architectural freedom are above all a social issue that must be seen from inside a political structure, not from outside it.” - Lina Bo Bardi

Taking this forward, one can understand how Bo Bardi has had a democratic approach to curating a public space. Demonstrated with open courtyards and

pedestrianisation in and around the site, there is a definite prioritisation of people over cars, encouraging the user to walk down these interactive pedestrian friendly spaces that further cultivate the imagination and visual nourishment of passers by. The lack of rigid zoning encourages users to claim this space in their own way, therefore fostering a strong sense of community and ownership. Allowing nature morph through the solid construction, preserving a waterway through the old factory and creating a permanent feature out of it. Integrating the natural elements into the urban fabric ensuring that the public space feels organic and open. Allowing nature to physically bleed into the building, but not only that, she encouraged it and enabled it's existence.



Figure 14: Human Interactions in Phase 1, (Kon, 2019b).

To conclude...

The SESC Pompéia estate was more than just an architectural landmark, it was a pass over of power to the public creating an inclusive, adaptive and deeply human space. With the entire philosophy that underpinned her design

was to be sensitive with an adaptive reuse strategy proving that an one does not need to erase the past to create a bright future in replacement.

Bo Bardi created a vibrant hub of culture for social interaction, evolving pedestrianisation and accessibility throughout, with participatory design. “Putting people in the centre of the project” - Lina Bo Bardi; statements such as this are often no more than a pious hope but Bo Bardi meant it through and through with her essentially unpretentious and playful yet brutalist building.

Challenging the traditional role of an architect, Bo Bardi put the public on a pedestal as the ultimate creator of the space.

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