

# São Paulo

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A ramshackle, rusty Volkswagen Brasília – launched in 1973 to celebrate the 1960 inauguration of Brazil’s federal capital – rotates slowly on a platform. Next to it is a now-defunct magazine, *Manchete*, which carries an advertisement from the same period: “Brasília: no better idea yet.”

It’s surprising to see this artwork, *Brasília* by Bruno Farias (2018), displayed in the context of an art fair. In 1956, when Brazil’s then-president Juscelino Kubitschek ordered the construction of the nation’s modernist capital city as part of his “fifty years of prosperity in five” plan, its principal architect Oscar Niemeyer characterised his proposed design as “a simple city, a rational one”. It was a utopian principle, matched 14 years later when Volkswagen decided to begin work on the Brasília – its first car designed and produced in Brazil, and a project intended to reflect the potency and boldness of the nation’s new capital. Forty-eight years on, however, the presence of the remnants of the car in Farias’s artwork seems a sign that Brazil’s one-time utopianism can no longer mask its current social and political realities. The nation’s former president Dilma Rousseff was impeached in 2016 on contested charges of criminal administrative misconduct; her predecessor Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is currently serving a 12-year prison sentence for corruption; the country experienced its longest-ever recession between 2014 and 2017, with its economy shrinking by almost 8 per cent; and the nationwide corruption scandal, which the criminal investigation Operation Car Wash has been working to expose since 2014, has now extended to current president Michel Temer and implicated politicians of all parties. This sense of endemic failure is well represented in Farias’s scrapped car, shown by Galeria Periscópio as part of São Paulo’s SP-Arte, the biggest art fair in South America, with an annual attendance of 34,000 visitors over five days.

“I’m an optimist,” says SP-Arte’s director and founder Fernanda Feitosa about the political scandals engulfing the nation. “The thing that is important is that legal and cultural institutions be preserved and come out of this process stronger.” SP-Arte, however, is not immune to politics. Hosted each April, the event takes place in Oscar Niemeyer’s Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion in São Paulo’s Parque Ibirapuera, a 1.58sqkm urban park in the centre of the city. Opened in 1954, Parque Ibirapuera is São Paulo’s largest park and receives 14 million visitors annually, as well as hosting most of the main cultural events, such as art biennials and fashion weeks. But its future is unclear. In the week before the 2018 iteration of SP-Arte opened, the city’s mayor João Doria resigned in order to run for the state governorship, after only one year and three months in his post. Yet in the course of his short



A view from the rooftop of São Paulo’s Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo. Parque Ibirapuera is visible to the left, including Oscar Niemeyer’s rectilinear Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion.

administration, Doria created a Municipal Secretary of Privatisation, with the first stage in this operation being the privatisation of six municipal parks, chief among them Parque Ibirapuera. The contract for the park’s operation, which is currently out for tender, will last for 35 years.

In a city already riven with economic inequality, it seems vital to the future of São Paulo that its main public spaces be retained as places of inclusion, rather than being subdivided for the extraction of profit. To avoid this, “the City Hall should approve a new masterplan for the park before making the concession,” says Thobias Furtado, president of Parque Ibirapuera Conservação, the non-profit organisation that manages the park and will do so until the privatisation process is complete. “Nowhere else in the world is the contract for urban parks given to private companies. When they are not run by the state, public parks should be administered by

non-profit organisations.” It is not yet known who will operate the park in the long-run, but Doria has already estimated that the first stage of the process will bring R\$1.6bn (£330m) to the city over the course of the 35-year contract. Furtado, however, is afraid that the absence of clear rules of occupation will unduly benefit the private sector: “The main focus of a private company is always to increase its own profits, while the organisation that runs the parks should concentrate on the public’s needs.”

It remains unclear why the six parks were chosen to be privatised. Throughout the process, there has been a resounding lack of effective public consultation and transparency. The next step for the Municipal Secretary of Privatisation is to put out for tender services and places such as Anhembi, São Paulo’s main exhibition and convention centre; the Interlagos motorsport circuit; Pacaembu football stadium; 15 public markets; bus terminals; public



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A series of views from in and around  
Parque Ibirapuera, including the domed  
Oca pavilion and its series of ramps  
(right); Avenida Quarto Centenário  
just outside of the park; and design  
studio Ovo's Campo concrete sofa,  
which is installed just outside of  
the Ciccillo Matarazzo Pavilion.





Humberto Campana (above) runs his design studio with his brother Fernando from the neighbourhood of Santa Cecilia. To the right, a member of the studio, Cristina Aparecida de Souza, works on one of the Campanas' furry Bolotas armchairs.



street lighting; and even cemeteries and funeral services. São Paulo is a huge city – if it were a country, it would be among the 50 largest economies in the world – and the municipal budget for 2017 was R\$54.7bn (£11.25bn). Doria and his successor Bruno Covas have argued that privatisation is justified by population growth, which means that the city needs to focus on expanding and improving essential services, but given the scale of the sums involved, the key issue seems to be one of how public resources are managed, rather than budgetary constraints. In a city going through the rapid and seemingly unnecessary privatisation of its public spaces, the shadow of elitism seems always to be lurking just around the corner. However, some design initiatives have begun to emerge as interesting responses to the status quo. Whether they are democratising creative practices, returning long abandoned spaces to the citizenry, or suggesting new forms of interaction, members of São Paulo's design community are beginning to react against the political realities presented by their city.

Eight kilometres away from Ibirapuera Park, next to the city centre in the neighbourhood of Santa Cecilia, lies São Paulo's most-celebrated design studio – that of Fernando and Humberto Campana. Behind a roll-up door with no sign or other form of identification, the two brothers work from a former bus garage. The Campanas began their career in the 1980s, assembling ordinary objects into astonishing furniture configurations as a means of bringing preciousness to mundane materials. “In São Paulo you need to build beauty to keep your sanity intact,” says Humberto. The studio's 1991 Favela chair, an early example of which is housed in the permanent collection of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, is a striking demonstration of this ethos. Created in homage to the resourcefulness with which residents of the city's favelas make use of materials at hand, it consists of strips of wood glued and nailed together seemingly at random. Yet today the Favela chair is produced by the Italian furniture company Edra – at a price point which stands as an affront to the community from which the chair got its name – and many Brazilians have come to perceive the brothers as alien to the city in which they work. Humberto sums up a question he and his brother are typically asked by local costumers: “Are you based in Italy?”

A few initiatives may change this situation, however. In 2009, the brothers created Instituto

Campana, an organisation focused on social transformation through design that has been leading workshops for community groups that address social vulnerability. “We created the Favela chair a long time ago,” says Humberto. “Now we are coming back and doing this as an act of repair, rather than doing something that was inspired by the slums, but not conscious of them.” Partnerships with artisans are also part of the Campana Institute's work, with the possibility that the artisans who attend its workshops may eventually become part of the production team. In order to further democratise the studio's design practice – which in the past has often been manifested as products for luxury brands such as Lasvit or editioned work for galleries such as Friedman Benda – in 2017 the brothers launched Assimétrica, a collection of eight pieces for Tok&Stok, a São Paulo-based ready-to-assemble furniture retailer that has 55 shops in Brazil, of which 15 are in the city of São Paulo, and which professes to launch 10 products a day. Made of lacquered MDF, the Assimétrica has proved popular, with several pieces having already sold out. The collection contains chairs, benches, sideboards, desks, shelves and tables, all inspired by furniture manufactured using wood waste from the construction industry. “We have always had the desire to democratise our work in Brazil without leaving aside the concept and the quality that we believe in,” says Humberto. “We finally achieved this through this partnership.”

IBGE, the Brazilian public institute responsible for statistical data, reports that in the first decade of the 21st century, more than 35 million people have joined Brazil's lower-middle class. In Brazil, a family with an income of £206 per capita per month is considered middle class, although this definition is controversial: in a country of continental size and with huge regional disparities, it is impossible to compare what you can buy with the same amount of money in São Paulo and in the poor regions in the northeast. Certainly, however, the expansion of credit and the increasing income levels seen during Lula's presidency have been responsible for a new army of Brazilian consumers, principally focused around smartphones and household appliances. Online shops have also bolstered sales of low-price, mass-market furniture. Besides Tok&Stok, design retailers such as Oppa, Orb and Muma have emerged to target middle-class consumers. Oppa and Orb have an



in-house design team, but Oppa additionally keeps a permanent open call for new product ideas on its website. Muma, an online platform, produces its own range of furniture, but also serves as a curated platform through which independent designers can connect directly to consumers. At the moment, around 116 studios from Brazil and abroad are represented. Oppa and Muma both started as e-commerce brands in 2011 and 2014 respectively, but soon realised the challenges of selling furniture without a physical space for customers to try their

“Brazil had a strong modernist period which has dominated the design language.” —Fernanda Feitosa

products. They have been investing in real-world showroom displays that can be linked to e-commerce and delivery platforms.

Although Ikea has had an office in Brazil since 2012, it has yet to begin operating. Tok&Stok has been trading since 1978 and is only now facing competition with the arrival of the new brands. Although Orb is limited to online sales, it is a spin-off of Lojas Americanas, a department store that is one of Brazil’s biggest online retailers. The furniture industry is beginning to understand design as a tool for strengthening the internal market, opening up space for a new generation of designers.

One of the youngest to benefit from this process is Humberto da Mata, an architect from Brasília, who is now based in São Paulo. Having graduated from Universidade de Brasília in 2010, da Mata says that he decided to become a designer after completing a workshop with the Campana Brothers at the Domaine de Boisbuchet, a bucolic castle in France from which the Vitra Design Museum has long run a series of summer workshops. Later, da Mata worked briefly in the Campanas’ studio. “The first piece I designed was inspired by the ready-made; taking something that already exists and changing its function,” says da Mata. “The idea of assemblage has always interested me.” Da Mata currently sells his work

through Muma; he was also invited to show at SP-Arte, for which he saw an opportunity to produce pieces that broadened his practice.

“I chose to design a ceramic vase collection in a limited edition of four,” he says. “I wanted to limit the time spent on the production process, consider this as an experiment, and then move onto the next project.” The Morphus collection is executed by hand and the pieces are formed out of different geometric elements, such as circles, cones, tubes and arches. Even though these pieces were produced by a pottery manufacturer, da Mata assembled their constituent parts. The process included finishing the works with a low-temperature enamel embedded with coloured glass particles. When heated, these particles melt and fuse to the surfaces, creating an unexpected dotted effect. “It was an enigmatic but liberating process,” he says. “The clay can crack or shrink and the final result is only discovered when the oven is opened.” Da Mata’s suppliers are all from São Paulo and this, he explains, is important to him: he is sensitive to what he sees as the threat of cheap, imported goods from China and similar manufacturing hubs. “China[...] turned the Bauhaus dream into a reality,” says da Mata. “It is producing good industrial design at an affordable price, but at what cost to labour, the environment and society? The next stage in this development of design is a more conscious consumer who wants to know how and where the design piece was produced and appreciates local design and a fair production chain.” While São Paulo’s public spaces may be becoming less democratic, da Mata sees utilisation of the city and its resources as essential to his vision of a progressive design scene.

Another workshop at Boisbuchet, this one with the dutch designer Maarten Baas, proved the inspiration for the Brasília-born architect Ricardo Innecco and product designer Mariana Ramos to start collaborating in São Paulo under the title Rain. Working initially with installations, their design practice is now built on re-contextualising everyday objects by creating utilitarian products and art projects that use humour to engender a sense of displacement. A series of oversized stainless-steel chains, for instance, has a strongly sculptural quality and no concrete function, butting up against the typical utilitarian qualities of chains to generate a feeling of uncanniness. The studio’s Mesa Piscinas – swimming pool-shaped tables – meanwhile, are



Fernando Campana (right) oversees the creation of works such as swirling textile elements (below) for the studio’s 2002 Sushi collection of chairs, benches, tables and cabinets.





Below: Humberto da Mata (left) and Mariana Ramos and Ricardo Innecco of Rain (right) share a studio space in São Paulo. They are part of an emerging generation of designers responding to and hoping to move beyond the city’s strong modernist legacy.



accompanied by tiny pool ladders that can be removed and repositioned. They possess a strong geometrical frame, clearly influenced by Brazil’s tradition of modernist architecture, and are covered by a layer of glass made to look like water. The results are clean, postmodern pieces that remove swimming pools from their original environment and give them new and irreverent uses indoors.

Prior to starting Rain, Ramos worked at Ovo, a leading Brazilian design brand founded in 1991. Like Rain, Ovo’s designers play with perception,

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flexibility of forms and uses. Also showing in 2018 as part of SP-Arte, they presented two new sets of furniture. The first launch, Check, is a group of wooden side tables based on chess pieces. King, Queen, Bishop, Knight, Rook and Pawn are shown stripped of their original use and displaced from the chess set to the living room. The second one, Writing, is a group of carbon-steel coat hangers that explore the graphical qualities of the alphabet. Gerson de Oliveira, who launched the brand with Luciana Martins, says that São Paulo’s design scene has changed dramatically. “The design scene is now in a very vibrant moment and it’s more mature,” he says. “We have a much closer relationship between industry and designers than 10 or 15 years ago.” De Oliveira puts this down to a change in mentality on the part of manufacturers which “enables us to design pieces with a certain level of complexity”. In Ibirapuera Park, it is possible to interact with one of Ovo’s most famous pieces, Campo: a modular sofa made of pigmented concrete blocks that can be arranged in multiple ways to allow user participation. “People love having it in the park to sit on and jump over,” says de Oliveira.

These emerging designers both incorporate and critique aspects of São Paulo’s urban fabric in their work, experimenting freely with the form to bring humour and lightness to their objects. Creations like

this, however, have been comparatively rare in the past. “Brazil had a strong modernist period, which has kind of overshadowed and dominated the design language,” says Feitosa, who, in her work as director of SP-Arte, is attempting to balance this out with the presentation of newer forms of practice. “Although [the modernist tradition] is still an influence, we do now have a number of contemporary designers that are showing up.” The country’s modernist movement officially started in São Paulo in 1922 with the Semana de Arte Moderna festival, but its first modernist furniture designers were mainly immigrants: the Polish Jorge Zalszupin, the Ukrainian Gregori Warchavchik, the Portuguese Joaquim Tenreiro and the Italian Lina Bo Bardi. Under the influence of international avant-garde movements, many of these designers left behind a Europe devastated by two world wars for a pre-industrial city in South America, where they enjoyed considerable success. “The 1950s in Brazil were the golden age,” says Lissa Carmona, director of Etel, a São Paulo furniture-design brand that combines historical and contemporary pieces, and which also trains woodworkers. Founded in 1993, it has contributed to the promotion and recovery of a generation of Brazilian modernist designers, producing furniture re-editions of internationally known practitioners such as Oscar Niemeyer and Lasar Segall, but also less famous figures like Paulo Werneck, Oswaldo Bratke and Giuseppe Scapinelli. “That was a time when Brazilian design was produced by artisans and the original pieces were really well made,” says Carmona. “They played with techniques of wood craftsmanship that are still very difficult to produce today.”

This desire to continue to work with and employ Brazil’s history is also visible within São Paulo’s architecture. Since the city’s foundation by Jesuits in the 16th century, São Paulo’s heart has been its downtown, but the area went through a period of decay after the state government headquarters decamped to Morumbi in 1964 and companies moved to other areas of the city, such as Avenida Paulista. The central Sé, República and Bom Retiro districts are now largely occupied by poor families with little access to basic services and the consumer market; security problems, informal commerce and drug consumption are on the rise. In spite of these issues, however, the city centre has continued to function





São Paulo's cityscape includes a number of significant modernist structures, including Lina Bo Bardi's MASP museum (above and left). Bo Bardi also designed the SESC Pompéia leisure centre (above right), whose stark use of concrete contrasts to the red brick of the city's oldest art museum, the Pinacoteca do Estado de São Paulo (right) in downtown São Paulo.





as an important economic axis, particularly following a revival started around the turn of the 21st century, when a joint effort between public power, private initiative and third-sector entities began to renovate a series of São Paulo’s historic landmarks. This period saw the restoration of the early 20th-century Pinacoteca de São Paulo museum of visual arts by Paulo Mendes da Rocha, which was completed in 1998; the 1930s Municipal Market in 2004; the creation of Sala São Paulo concert hall in the former Julio Prestes railway station in 1998; and the Portuguese Language Museum in the Estação da Luz railway station in 2006.

One element involved in the revival of São Paulo’s historic landmarks is Pivô. Founded in 2012, this arts space is based in a labyrinthine 3,500sqm area within Oscar Niemeyer’s Copan, a portion of the building that had been abandoned for 20 years. “This place was never meant to have a public use. It was a residual space,” says Fernanda Brenner, Pivô’s founder and artistic director. Pivô started as a temporary artistic intervention in the empty space inside Copan. After its completion, the space’s owner proposed that if Brenner took over the monthly expenses, she be granted a 20-year lease to use the site. “I don’t have a business mind, but I said yes anyway,” says Brenner. “We had to become an institution and create ways to make money to keep the place. São Paulo has a very non-healthy art scene in a way. Because of the strong market, some institutions are more or less established, but we don’t have anything like a Kunsthalle model or artist-run spaces.” She describes Pivô as “a place that artists make; it’s not an exhibition venue where we just bring things and show them”. Pivô harbours a prolific artistic-residency programme, and the space is supported by a network of private institutions, strategic partnerships, membership programmes, direct donations and annual auctions. “Nowadays we are almost self-sufficient in installing and producing shows, which means that everything here can keep going regardless of how complex the financial situation is.”

“The construction of Copan began at the start of the 1950s and it took 10 years for it be built,” says Brenner. “The construction company went bankrupt and then the construction site itself was abandoned for five years.” That was the moment at which Niemeyer was invited to build Brasília, and an exclusivity clause in his contract meant that he had to leave behind his other construction projects around the city. Bradesco, a major Brazilian Bank,

bought the construction site in 1957 and completely changed the interiors. “Niemeyer’s concept was based on Le Corbusier’s Unité d’Habitation model, albeit in a very Brazilian version of it,” says Brenner. “That version of the project never went through, but in the end the concept worked because the building is fully occupied with people from all sorts of backgrounds.” Today, Copan holds a commercial gallery, with additional services such as hairdressers, restaurants and other things for residents. “We are in the transitional floor between the commercial gallery and the apartments,” says Brenner. “The owner bought the space for a very low price. He bought it for speculation in the 1980s when Copan itself was almost a squat. This part of the city was super dangerous.” This area of central São Paulo is now going through a complex process of real-estate speculation and gentrification. Prices per square metre are increasing, but because Copan is so huge, it has managed to survive. “My thesis is that people who can afford a place like this don’t want a place like this,” says Brenner when asked why the space now occupied by Pivô remained abandoned for such a long period. “They want to live in big classy buildings in Faria Lima [the wealthy area of the city].”

Brenner is aware of Pivô’s role in the ongoing gentrification of this part of the city and is trying to mitigate against this. The space has worked to establish partnerships with initiatives such as Fundo Fica, a fund managed by the non-profit Association for Communal Property, which aims to guarantee affordable housing in big cities, preventing the expulsion of the poorest from the central regions, as well as experimenting with new models of property ownership. Together with Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam and movements such as Nove de Julho and Hotel Cambridge which took part during the 11th São Paulo Architecture Biennial in 2017, the association has promoted workshops and activities centred around appropriation and occupation. This partnership invites the public to experience the work carried out by activist organisations and to examine architecture’s social potential. This is an urgent issue. According to São Paulo’s governor Márcio França, there are currently 150 irregularly occupied buildings in the city’s downtown district and the city requires an additional 358,000 homes.

In the 1950s, São Paulo was the richest state in Brazil due to its coffee production; it was also the



The Copan building (top and right) was designed by Oscar Niemeyer. Construction was interrupted when Niemeyer began work on the nation’s Brasília project, but eventually completed in the 1960s. Today, a long-abandoned space within the building has been taken over by Pivô (top right), an arts organisation.







A view out over the centre of São Paulo, taken from the rooftop of the city's Edifício Itália skyscraper.

largest and housed the country's biggest port. In addition, it was on the verge of fully fledged industrialisation. The modernist movement benefitted from those conditions. The buildings that were erected throughout the city also offered proposals of how to live together, despite differences of socio-economic standing. Copan, one of the most iconic constructions of this time, exemplifies this ethos: with its range of housing configurations (apartments with one, two and three bedrooms), it allowed people of different economic means to live on the same site, and continues to do so today. In the 1960s and 70s, however, when the city began to receive large waves of immigration, mainly from the northwest of the country, real-estate speculation expelled the poorest people from São Paulo's centre. More than 2,000 slum areas have developed since then. A city in which the modernist project was so important – whose public policy was once aimed at

reducing the housing gap – seems to have forgotten the modernist lessons that are really worth preserving. Instead of transforming abandoned spaces and making them available for a broad range of users, government housing programmes are increasingly forcing people to the city's peripheries, where infrastructure, leisure centres and other local amenities are scarce. Compounded by daily traffic jams, exorbitant living costs and, more recently, the plans to privatise public spaces, it is difficult not to find São Paulo a hostile site. In the face of the complex set of challenges faced by the inhabitants of the city, architecture, art and design can be small tools of resistance. Whether it is an old modernist building experiencing a revival of its original ethos, or a push for well-designed products that a larger number of people can afford, contemporary design practitioners in São Paulo are attempting to transform it into a more humane place. **END**