

Three topics, two cities

on Rio, Genoa and the politics of huge events

An interview to **Guilherme Lassance** by **Andrea Anselmo**



Guilherme Lassance is an associate professor at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

At present, he is also holding the position of visiting scholar at Columbia University in New York.

Last January he gave a lecture at Genova Polytechnic school.

His interesting studies on the pedagogical potential of Rio's informal city in the education of architects develop strategies for a contemporary re-reading of the city particularly effective on fast-developing countries. This research culminated in 2013 with a book called "Rio Metropolitano"

co-edited with Pedro Varela and Cauê Costa Capillé and the collaboration of some students. Many are the themes arisen by Lassance's work and research.

The interview hereafter deals with three of them: first, Lassance's research book, second, the parallel between Rio and Genova and third, the political situation in Rio at the beginning of the biennial of international sport events the city will host.

1 | WHAT IS THE IMAGE OF BRAZILIAN ARCHITECTURE SHARED BY PEOPLE AROUND THE WORLD? INSTEAD HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE IT?

It's hard to generalize, but I think the perception that most of the world has of Brazilian architecture is still very much influenced by the work of Oscar Niemeyer, the Brazilian architect who stood out in the international arena. This image is further enhanced by Brasilia, an extraordinary project to create in such a short time and from scratch, a new capital. Brasilia thus bears this close connection of modern architecture and urbanism with the national city-symbol. Furthermore, I believe that the work of Niemeyer conveys the idea of an architecture that expresses some concepts usually associated to Brazil: sensuality, exuberance, mingling with the natural landscape, large scale etc. It's a whole set of stereotypes that end up crystallizing such perception and hindering the emergence of other possible architectural expressions. Especially because since then the country didn't see any another work with such dimensions. Brasilia actually represents the end of an era, a public national expression of architecture commissioned and promoted by the state. Since then, the Brazilian architects have lost their public sponsor and became hostages to a market devoid of this kind of vision... Today there is a tribute to some other important figures whose work had been somewhat overshadowed by the brightness of Brasilia. Exhibitions, publications and recent international awards have helped to reveal to the world names such as Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Lina Bo Bardi and Lele among others. My description of Brazilian architecture, although made from within and not from outside Brazil, is largely populated by the same characters with, of course, the addition of some other names that are mostly unknown to the general public, although I have to say that the work of all those architects tend to be perceived superficially, as there are not actually experienced. Formal and visual effects stand thus more easily in the foreground at the expense of the intelligence and the inventiveness of spatial and materials solutions.

2 | WHY THE BUILDINGS THAT YOU HAVE INCLUDED IN YOUR BOOK WERE HIDDEN BEFORE?

The cases we chose to study were not exactly 'hidden', but their design lessons were. Most of them are even quite famous. They are intensely used places. But their visual appearance, often unattractive, tends to dissuade a more careful approach that could lead to the recognition of their spatial intelligence.

3 | WHEN WE THINK ABOUT A GUIDE THE FIRST IDEA IS AN ITINERARY SHOWN THROUGH PICTURES. IN YOUR BOOK WE CAN COUNT JUST FEW OF THEM AND ALL IN BLACK AND WHITE. COULD YOU EXPLAIN US THIS DECISION?

Our intention was to look for a mode of representation and communication of the selected projects that would allow us to avoid the way in which contemporary architecture tends to be disseminated and consumed. Photography favors a highly visual and superficial apprehension of the projects. Hence, the priority was given to axonometric drawings that helped us transcend the issue of the external expression in order to highlight other aspects. At the same time, we believed that photography should be included as a resource for identifying the projects. We then decided to use it as a means of valuing the unlikely combinations of programs as well as other identified qualities by opting for a less conventional framing, thus subverting the way architecture is usually shown. The choice of black and white only reinforced this intention.

4 | THE KNOWLEDGE OF THESE MISSING LESSONS IN RIO IS RELEVANT IN ORDER TO GIVE A CULTURAL MESSAGE TO THE STUDENTS, AS YOU HAVE TOLD US. BUT THERE IS A POSSIBILITY THAT THIS MESSAGE IS ALSO A RESOURCE TO REFLECT ON THE POSSIBILITY OF WORKING INSIDE THE CITY, ON THOSE BUILDINGS, RATHER THAN USING MORE LAND?

Yes. We understand that these qualities we call metropolitan by referring, of course, to an extensive bibliography, have, in fact, direct relationship with the working conditions for an architect in an existing, intense and congested city, where the lack of space calls for a design ability to handle such a challenge. This is precisely the condition of possibility of the vertical club, the multi-storey parking, the open and flexible structures etc. Some situations we present in the book also provide a glimpse of an alternative to museification processes that have been affecting urban centers, showing ways to reconcile the needs and opportunities offered by the present moment with the imperatives of the protection of our historical heritage.

6 | IN GENOVA LECTURE YOU MENTIONED HOW THIS METHOD COULD BE APPLIED TO WIDER-AREAS SUCH AS WHOLE COUNTRIES. DO YOU THINK THAT AN INVESTIGATION LIKE THE ONE YOU DID WOULD BE POSSIBLE OR NECESSARY IN ITALY OR EUROPE?

What we want to create with this book is a tool to help us expand our understanding of the possibilities that architecture can offer to deal with the contemporary city and its inherent complexity. Indeed, we intend to improve the design culture and increase our competence as architects, thus following the trail initiated by other authors-architects who preceded us. These architects work in places where, differently from Rio, there is no lack of contemporary architecture, the one that is usually widespread by specialized journalism, whether in printed or digital format. The intrepid 'Made in Tokyo' shows us that such architects are no longer content with the conventional approach to architecture and are seeking a better understanding of spatial and material solutions that are tuned with the current daily experience people have in our cities and countries. Regarding the application of the method to larger areas, yes, we believe it is possible to use the proposed criteria to characterize dominant trends of metropolitan qualities through the evaluation of the prevalent occurrences of architectures in these areas. The great advantage of having a scale to 'measure' such qualities is to compare the situations between them and thus detect possible correlations between factors instead of determining an absolute value of performance.

7 | WOULD IT BE CORRECT TO DEFINE THE BOOK A RIO'S ARCHITECTURE MANUAL MORE THAN A REAL GUIDE? THIS KIND OF ANALYSIS REVEAL AN OFFSTAGE DEEP REFLECTION ON ARCHITECTURE STATE OF ART IS THERE ANY CONCEALED THEORY OR STATEMENT YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE?

The book *Metropolitan Rio* is not exactly a manual of Rio's architecture, but rather a manual for a way to understand and produce architecture. The region of Rio we decided to study - the most touristic part of the city - certainly provides a good example because of the value added to the land in that narrow territory and the glaring absence of worthy contemporary architectures. This is the meaning of the subtitle 'guide for an architecture' and not 'guide of architecture'. The underlying reflection is explicit in the long text of the book's introduction. I would emphasize here the fact that yes, our aim is to carry out an offstage reflection on the state of the art of architecture, understanding the urgent need to change our attitude, as architects, towards the reality in which we are intricately immersed. This kind of argument could easily be assimilated to the appeals made by a certain critique of architecture that historically claimed the recognition of the vernacular architecture as the genuine representative of the everyday experience. Following this appeal, we naturally turned our attention to the production of the pre-industrial past and to the 'architecture without architects', assuming therefore the authorial incompetence of the architect and restricting his/her performance to the sole reproduction of these traditional and popular formulas. With our *guide for an architecture*, we intend instead to awaken students and architects to the *possibility of the project* which would then be instructed by the intelligence of the daily experience of opportunistic designs that populate much of our existing cities. By doing so, we can then reconsider the current dominant paradigms that have been challenging the very concept of design: both the nostalgic ideal of the unplanned pre-industrial city and the seductive but hypocritical image of the self-built informal city.



We would like to ask you some questions somehow related to your visit in Genova.

8 | RIO AND GENOVA, ALTHOUGH VERY DIFFERENT IN SIZE, UNDOUBTEDLY SHARE MANY FEATURES IN THEIR GEOGRAPHIC AND ARCHITECTURAL FORM. ONE OF THOSE IS THE PARALLEL BETWEEN RIO'S PERIMETRAL AND GENOVA'S SOPRAELEVATA. THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE OF GENOVA: WOULD YOU BE MORE FAVORABLE TO ITS DEMOLITION OR CONVERSION?

I was part of a group of architects who have publicly declared to be against the demolition of the Perimetral in Rio de Janeiro. We studied several possibilities for its conversion in an attempt to show the advantages of a symbolic rather than actual demolition by converting the expressway, for example, in a rail line capable of solving various other mobility problems in the city. Perhaps the case of the Sopraelevata in Genova is a bit different and we should keep our minds open and not simplify the understanding of the Perimetral by transforming it in an absolute reference for assessing other contexts. In any case, we always have to evaluate the pros and cons for the conversion of this type of structure before proceeding to its demolition. I have to say that being a tourist in Genova, I would probably prefer to have the viaduct out from my postcard but this is only one very partial point of view that needs to be confronted to other logics. Is it possible to find any potential mutualism of the Sopraelevata with other kinds of programs or interests that could add more value to that infrastructure than the sole use as an expressway? That's actually the sense of the lessons drawn out from our study on Rio's architecture.

9 | WHAT WAS THE APPROVAL PROCESS OF RIO'S PERIMETRAL DEMOLITION?

The decision was made by the mayor without any public debate that would allow the expression of different opinions. We tried to lead this debate, but economic and political interests at play spoke louder and the schedule of major events ended up serving as an alibi to justify decisions without any discussion.



10 | THE DEMOLITION OF RIO'S PERIMETRAL SEEMS TO HAVE ALREADY A BAD REPUTATION. WHICH IS THE REASON FOR THAT? IN GENOVA THIS SAME KIND OF "OLD HARBOUR RENEWING" TURNED OUT IN THE WIDELY APPRECIATED RENZO PIANO'S PROJECT. IS THERE A WAY, OR A WILL, TO GO IN THAT DIRECTION IN YOUR CITY?

In Rio, the demolition of the Perimetral serves mainly the interests of the real estate market in the way it was used as a symbol of the urban transformation of the old port area – a cartoon-like operation populated by some pathetic urban marketing projects signed by international stars of architecture generating land value increase and its corollary: gentrification of the whole area with the ejection of the poorest. This well known process becomes even more blatant in the context of a city where different social realities live side by side. Furthermore, there was no reflection on urban mobility that could be associated to a paradigm shift in favor of public transport thus serving as an argument for the demolition of the viaduct, as it in the case of other cities around the world like, for example, in San Francisco. In Rio, we are replacing the overpass by an underpass combined with other expressways, a decision that will continue privileging the car as the primary means of transportation.



Just a last question aside from the book..

11 | RIO WILL HOST THE MOST IMPORTANT EVENTS WORLDWIDE: 2014 FIFA WORLD CUP AND 2016 OLYMPICS. WHAT IS YOUR OPINION ABOUT STRESS OR BENEFITS THAT A COMPLEX REALITY SUCH AS RIO CAN DRAW FROM A SO INTENSE BIENNIUM? WHAT WILL REMAIN IN RIO WHEN THE LIMELIGHT WILL DROP? ARE ANY REUSE PROGRAMS PLANNED FOR EVENTS BUILDINGS, ANY NEW FUNCTIONS?

The city and the committees in charge of these events are heralding the importance of the games' legacy, but do not clearly explain how the new infrastructure will be reused. As the main site for the Olympics is located in an area where gated communities are the only mode of real estate development, we can easily understand that the olympic park is designed to improve land value thus benefiting, above all, the market ventures. In 2007, the city hosted the Pan American Games and the facilities built at that time have since become obsolete and are now being demolished. The construction industry is very powerful in Rio and has strong influence on political decisions. Most of the contracts follows the logic of the greater volume of work, ie, the higher cost of contracts at the expense of the real need: why the demolition of the Perimetral was essential to the games that will take place in an area located 40 kilometers away? While the Perimetral is being demolished, new viaducts are being built up to host bi-articulated buses lines, pompously called BRT (Bus Rapid Transport), whose capacity is far from meeting the needs of public transport. These new expressways are literally ripping the existing urban fabric of less privileged residential neighborhoods without any reflection in terms of impact or discussion with the local population.

RIO'S EVENTS

