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**brazilian gardens**

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*from picture to garden to city*  
*Roberto Burle Marx in Rio and Sao Paulo*

This text describes selected landscape architectural work of Roberto Burle Marx in modern and contemporary Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. There have been few landscape architects who have created such an encompassing body of work in the context of the modern urban landscape. In working with a wide scope of dimensions and materials varying from tablecloth to park, from the passionate use of vegetation to the development of sidewalk-patterns Burle Marx has transgressed borders not only between disciplines but also between garden- and cityspace. This offers an occasion to cast a view on a possible concept of garden closely interlinked with the city

*Picture*

Walking on the roof garden of the Safra Bank in the Rua Consolação in Sao Paolo (1982) the garden at first seems to be little more than an enlargement of one of Burle Marx's paintings. The constituent elements are minimal: Paving with stones of different colors and slightly raised beds filled with pebbles as extruded shapes in this composition, featuring a few expressive singular plants. This project carries the formal characteristics, which appear throughout Burle Marx's vast oeuvre: The Burle Marxian garden, „where the cubist principle of *mariage de contour* was given a three-dimensional rendering in terms of tropical planting and sinuous form," (1) has a strong and recognizable, graphic quality. Distinct fields of color and material set in clearly delineated, amorphous, shapes are prominent in most of Burle Marx's work. From the higher floors of the building, the two dimensional strength of the composition is even more compelling. However, here the height and the immanent depth of space in this urban situation show the interlinked spatial dimension of the garden and the surrounding space. The roof-terrace itself covers only a few square meters but opens to the impressive backdrop of high buildings and the roar of the city below immediately beyond the balustrade. The intermingling, flowing forms cover the entire plane and seem to urge over the edge of the roof terrace.



Without having a formal education in landscape architecture Burle Marx's background as a painter has indeed been enhanced frequently. Even though he reluctantly had to accept wide acclaim for „painting with plants“, his landscape architectural work does not let itself be reduced to the painterly image of a purely graphic application. „From a distance, the reds, greens and grays are abstract plant painting, but become an interplay of volume on close approach.“(2) The introduction and diligent use of native vegetation in the garden is a constituting characteristic. The plant as a curious and fascinating object is used in differentiating his complex composition of spaces.

Interwoven with the formal language in plane and volume of the projects is a statement about nature and the cultural environment. Just as much, as Burle Marx referred to himself as a garden artist, his designs structurally and formally engage a strict and controlled, artificial language. Even though Burle Marx was known for his concern about nature and vegetation, and his work substantially incorporates a wide and deep understanding especially of native flora and ecology, there is little conservationism about pristine nature in his designs. Less an interpretation of untended nature (or an epitome of it) his formal language enhances the artistic, cultural, man-made aspects of the garden and the human environment. The planes and spaces of his landscape architecture decidedly deal with an idea of nature shaped and invented by man; they are transpositions from uncultivated nature into a cultural setting.(3) His inventive images are set in the abstract realm and transferred into the garden, the park, and the city.



### *Garden*

The spatial concept of Burle Marx's landscape architectures does not confine itself to the site of the immediate project, but integrates the further horizon within. One masterly example can be found with the garden of the Olivio Gomez Estate in rural Sao José Dos Campos (1950). The finely sculpted, undulating terrain relates to the architecture by Rino Levi with a cliff-like jump in the topography. The larger garden is spatially further differentiated with strong vertical gestures such as a prominent row of araucaria trees, separating the formal garden next to the private house from the wider park, which in turn extends its spatial involvement to the valley and mountain range beyond. This open gesture which we would also find in an English landscape garden is recurrent in Burle Marx's urban projects.

Looking down from the higher floors of the above described Safrabank in Sao Paulo onto the roof-garden there is an architecturally stipulated perspective to this spatial aspect, analogously a vertical horizon. Seen from above the garden is not constrained by its balustrade. A variation of the patterns of the roof garden continues a few floors below on the streets beyond. As already with the early project for the Ministerio de Educação e Saúde in Rio de Janeiro (1938) this urban project includes the surroundings at, on and around the building on the terrace and at street level. At the Safrabank site the relationship between the garden design and its urban surroundings is strikingly close. It features a direct connection between the designed spaces and the wider street surface. The paving of the sidewalk in front of the building is a continuation of the polished floor-mosaic in the entrance hall of the bank. This large horizontal mosaic in turn is towered by a very large bas-relief in concrete dominating the back wall of the entrance hall. Yet the formal coherence within and between the single parts, be it roof garden or foyer floor design, is strong enough to form one singular atmosphere. Due to their strong graphic quality and the hardness of the materials used, all the different pieces have little difficulty in blending with the surfaces and markings of the streetscape, be it the asphalt of the road or the ubiquitous mosaic of the sidewalk. The intention of brushing aside of borders between spatial categories and disciplines becomes evident.(4) As Peter Walker describes in the essay „gardens without walls“, a picture, or a garden, does not necessarily constitute itself through borders, but also from the structure within: „Jackson Pollock, for example, tried to make space that was non-pictorial, actually within the painting. It was not a picture of something else but rather a spatial image in itself. ... If one could find those things in garden art with the internal power of these paintings, you could reduce the need for walls in much the same way that these artists have eliminated the need for a frame or a window to look through.“ (5)



I find this transgressing quality in the work of Burle Marx. The compelling internal strength of it does not convey itself merely through their their strong and enticing graphic language,

but its spatial morphology and structure, which at the same time is coherent and materially compatible enough to open itself to the urban surroundings. The gardens exert their influence and atmosphere beyond their boundaries. The cultural object garden in its built form leaves its secluded and walled state and enters the realm of the city.

### City



The garden immediately around the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro (1961) is an extraordinary example of a dense spatial composition in an open field, however condensed in the immediate surroundings of the building. Differentiated by large grouped tree volumes are distinct fields of various materials and a lawn parterre with the sinuous pattern that may be read as a formal ancestor to the later paving of the beachside promenade in the Copacabana bay. As with the garden of the Olivio Gomez Estate there is a gradual transformation in the density of spaces from the direct environment of the building and the beyond. The horizon here is the seascape of the Atlantic, but also the city and the vast stretches of the Aterro do Flamengo, the verdant strip, along the bay. The formal language of his sinuous paths and plantings interweave with the pattern of the motorway on-ramps and off-ramps, and set the modern skyline of the waterfront architectures in scene. The incorporated horizon is an urban horizon, not unlike the famed image that one has from within Fredrick Law Olmsted's Central Park of the building front framing it, but as opposed to the New York icon there is no wall or fence to separate park from avenue, one landscape from another.

Burle Marx „has used the flatness of the parterre, plaza rooftop, or lawn, both as a metaphor for the earth and as a surreal plane that magnifies the objects placed on it and the distant objects buildings, or landforms that enter into the larger composition. As did Corbusier, he places the objects on a plane not to glorify the object but to express the plane itself. And however enriched with pattern and planting, the plane remains taut.“ (6)

The plane that Burle Marx worked on does not restrain itself to that of the respective garden itself. Especially at the waterfront in Rio the projects incorporate the large-scale structures of traffic-lane entwinement and seemingly lose their spatial limitation. They are large projects in themselves, but adding to that they intermingle with the city structures. From this viewpoint we can imagine the city-landscape here as an extension of the garden.

Read like this, the gardens are a genuine contribution to the modern idea of open space in the city. The romantic idea of the arcadian English landscape as a „natural“ backdrop to the architecture in the free flowing space of the city of the Modern Movement (7), is reformulated into the idea of an expressively artificial (and artistic) open space that integrates with the city. The gardens speak an abstract formal language, which is related to that of modern Brazilian architecture and its modern city. This language has, as Kenneth Frampton claims, in the buildings of Oskar Niemeyer found its formal influence even into the shaping of modern Brazilian architecture.(8)



While the connection to built structures may be aided by a graphic and material compatibility of Burle Marx's formal language, there is fertile ground for the spreading of his design language from the garden into the streetscapes. Burle Marx could embed his design in the *calçada portuguesa*, the tradition of the Portuguese sidewalk paving in patterns fashionable in the 19th century. These layout techniques were imported to Brazil in the beginning of the 20th century.(9) This tradition carries a strong attentiveness towards the quality of public ground, including the formal relationship between open space and adjacent buildings. Burle Marx could reformulate this popular phenomenon with his formal vocabulary. While the famous waves at the Copacabana beach promenade in Rio are a direct adaptation of the pattern of the Rossio Square in Lisbon, Burle Marx was able to forge a new language onto the tradition. In this his gardens blend into the wider streetscapes of these Brazilian metropolises. The garden artist's language has been embedded in the streets.

Looking down from the roofgarden of the Safrabank one cannot fail to notice the similar pattern in the driveway of an underground parking-garage in the adjacent block. This might or might not be a design by Burle Marx but beyond that (even though this may be incidental) I'm compelled to mention the ease with which even the zebra crossing in front of the building seems to connect to the pattern of the original garden design. In creating a modern, abstract language on canvas and with gardens and landscapes Roberto Burle Marx succeeded in shaping a formal paradigm in the Brazilian idea of garden. The „estilo Burle Marx“ has become synonymous with the modern Brazilian garden. This language, originating from the



garden, is applied to a variety of sites from flowerbeds, to sidewalks, or promenade surfaces to walls and wider planes and evokes an atmospherical continuity in these Brazilian cities.

In this Burle Marx's gardens are only the forging predecessors of a popular phenomenon that has spread into the city. We can read Burle Marx's landscape architectural work as artistic treatment of a mere surface. Part of this surface, however, arches over and through the city. It arches over topography under streets, up and along walls. Its treated surface rudely appears in urban crevices - maybe not unlike Burle Marx's beloved bromeliads, which sustain themselves without soil in the cracks of walls and in trees - and becomes an integral part of the city environment.

Taken together, his vast oeuvre and his manifold imitations and quotations constitute a rich atmosphere in the Brazilian cities closely related to the garden. This links up to an encompassing furnishing of the modern city with gardens without walls in a lush and decided modern language.

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(1) Kenneth Frampton, *In Search of the Modern Landscape*, in: *Denatured Visions*, Stuart Wrede and William Howard Adams ed., New York 1994, 55

(2) Henrique Mindlin, quoted in: Frampton, New York, 1994, 55

(3) cf. Sima Eliovson, *The Gardens of Roberto Burle Marx*, Portland 1991, 45

(4) For the (unexecuted) design of Rosa Luxemburg Platz in Berlin, Burle Marx proposed to even incorporate the street surface itself into the pattern. cf. *Freiräume Stadt*, Maria Auböck, Andrea Cejka, ed., Vienna, 1996

(5) Peter Walker with Cathy Deino Blake, in: *The Meaning of Gardens*, Cambridge, London 1990, 120

(6) Peter Walker, Melanie Simo, *Invisible Gardens*, Cambridge, London, 1994, 66

(7) cf. Joachim W. Jacobs, *Das Bauhaus und die Theorie vom Raum*, *Topos 2*, 1993, 66

(8) cf. Kenneth Frampton, *Modern architecture*, 3<sup>rd</sup>, London 1994

(9) Burkhard Paetow, *Calçada Portuguesa*, Diplomarbeit FB7, TU Berlin 1998, 41ff