

Archetypes of detour in Brazil: Tent, pavilion and cultural center

Abstract

This paper investigates three projects — the tent for the First Mass in Brasília (1957), the Brazilian Pavilion at Expo 1958 in Brussels, and the Espaço Cultural Ulysses Guimarães in Brasília (1979) — as components of a genealogical sequence that illuminates the tensions between identity, modernity, technique, and representation in Brazilian architectural culture. Although emerging from distinct contexts and programs, these structures share key morphological and conceptual features: a programmatic organization anchored in the ground plane, and a performative approach to space-making that transforms architectural form into a narrative device. By comparing these cases, the study problematizes the notion of a national architectural theory articulated through exhibitionary buildings, understanding exhibitions and their involucre not merely as curatorial arrangements but as architectural acts charged with symbolic and political significance.

The relevance of these three cases lies in their potential to reveal a discrepancy between international reception and diplomatic practice in the formulation of a so-called “Brazilian architecture.” The itinerancy of the “tent” archetype across the studied cases — moving back and forth between Brasília and Brussels through Brazilian designers — enables the analysis of these projects within an expanded field of references, intentions, and modes of address.

Departing from the tent as a foundational figure, the paper examines the gap between the architectural project as conceived at the drawing table and its material realization on site. In this process, craftsmanship, construction techniques, and labor conditions emerge as central to the proposed genealogy, revealing how architectural meaning is produced not only through form and representation, but through the frictions between design intention and material execution.

Keywords

Exhibition Design, Brazilian Modern Architecture, Theory and Design, National Identity

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1. The Mass: labour as contingency

The history of the altar for the First Mass in Brasília begins in February 1957, when issue n.º 2 of *Revista Brasília* (Figure 1) published a photograph of a model attributed to Oscar Niemeyer: six white triangular pillars supporting a tensioned canvas.¹ The caption celebrated the project’s “rare plastic elegance, purity of lines, and remarkable economy of means.” The article itself did not address the mass or its design, but rather the relationship between Niemeyer and Cândido Portinari, evoking Pampulha as a landmark of this partnership and anticipating their modernist gesture within the context of the new capital. Nevertheless, the model appears sufficiently detailed: it assembled the Eucharistic devices — altar, stands, kneelers — beneath a light canopy, set before the cross that marked the site known as the Cruzeiro. The suspended curvilinear canopy and its relationship to the cross echoed Lucio Costa’s sketch for the Pilot Plan, a symbol of modern ambition.

In 1957, Brasília was still a precarious construction site, a “tropical Singapore,”² in the words of Juscelino

Kubitschek³: sheds, lodging houses, bars, and improvised wooden hotels sheltered the workers. It was in this setting that the inaugural mass took place on 3rd May 1957. The magazine *O Cruzeiro* (n.º 31) estimated that over 15,000 people attended, including several dozen Carajá indigenous people brought from Bananal Island to reinforce the scenography of a “second first mass”, a reference to the founding episode celebrated 450 years earlier and canonized as the First Mass in Brazil in Victor Meirelles’s famous 1861 painting.⁴ The theme, however, had also been reinterpreted by Cândido Portinari (1948), whose transition from naturalism to geometric clarity brings the modern painter and architect into alignment within a shared vision of modernist principles.

If, before the model with its white pillars and Niemeyer’s name, Portinari’s mass seemed to predominate, the altar actually built — with exposed wooden pillars of circular section (Figure 3) — produced the opposite impression, revealing the naturalism

1. *Revista Brasília* 2 (1957).
 2. Juscelino Kubitschek, *Por que construí Brasília?* (Senado Federal, 2000), 87.

3. Juscelino Kubitschek (1902–1976) served as President of Brazil from 1956 to 1961. He is best known for his developmental agenda, summarized in the slogan “fifty years of progress in five,” and for commissioning the construction of Brasília as the country’s new capital. Kubitschek promoted rapid industrialization, infrastructure expansion, and an international image of Brazil as a modern, forward-looking nation, in which architecture and urban planning played a central symbolic role.
 4. *Revista O Cruzeiro* 31 (1957).



Figure 1. *Revista Brasília* 2. Arquivo Público do Distrito Federal.

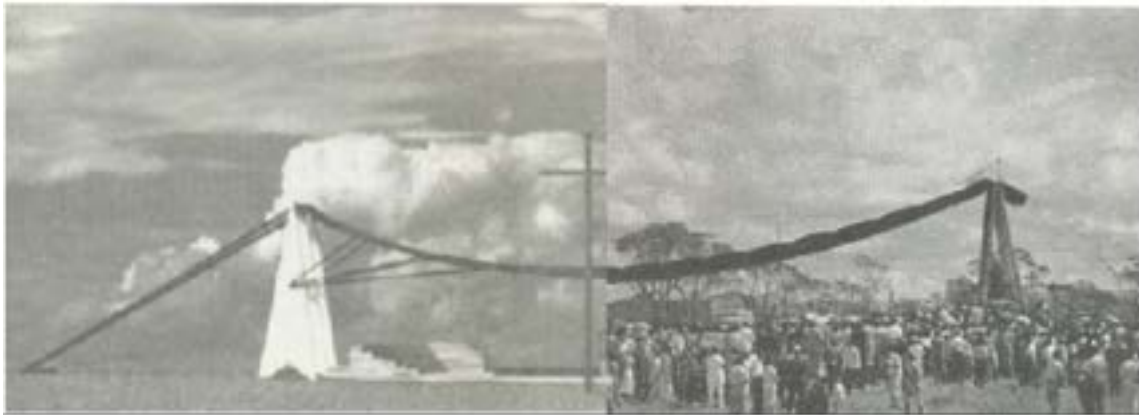


Figure 2. First Mass in Brasília. Arquivo Público do Distrito Federal - with intervention by the author.

present in Meirelles's painting. This contrast highlights the distance between idealized form and contingent materiality, questioning the project as evidence of a broader process. The comparison between the model published in *Revista Brasília* n.º 2 and later descriptions of the building (Figure 2) reveals two central aspects for this analysis: Niemeyer's authorship disappears from the narrative, and the final result presents itself as a stripped-down version.

The subsequent iconography densifies the episode. A photograph (Figure 4) from the Altamiro de Moura Pacheco collection suggests that the wooden pillars predated the mass and originally appeared in a different configuration. This hypothesis points to the reuse of pre-existing structures — possibly construction tools or temporary supports (Figure 4A) — adapted to carry the canvas. The transformation of these elements from auxiliary devices into components of a monumental yet ephemeral project establishes a direct dialogue between labor and form, allowing the architecture to expose otherwise concealed aspects of its own making. The absence of technical drawings further reinforces the likelihood of improvisation. Whether functioning as shores, frames, or drilling devices (Figure 5), their adaptation underscores the

presence of popular and anonymous construction knowledge rooted in Brazil's *pau a pique* tradition,⁵ coexisting with modern ingenuity on the Brasília construction site.

In this context, the question becomes how the altar, as built, brings together the monumental and the vernacular through its material means. Can it be understood as a spontaneous exhibition of a specifically Brazilian architecture, insofar as it makes its own modes of construction visible? And, in this sense, can architectural design itself operate as a form of exhibiting, acting as a critical and symbolic device?

Given the documentary gap, the redrawing and three-dimensional modelling (Figure 5) of the altar proved to be important methods for advancing the investigation. The graphic reconstruction based on photographs and contemporary descriptions made it possible to explore hypotheses of structural arrangement, testing different spatial and functional configurations. By simulating materiality and assembly, the modelling operated not only as a representational tool but as a critical instrument, capable of revealing divergences between design (in this case, a model, due to the absence of known drawings) and construction, as well as bringing the object closer to the experimental field of modern architecture. Thus, the absence of written sources was compensated by a design procedure that simultaneously documents and interprets.

Among the conclusions, the canvas supported by reused pillars, as defended by us, exposes the clash between design and contingency, between the modernist promise and the improvisation of the *candangos*.⁶



Figure 3. Tent for the First Mass in Brasília (1957). Arquivo Público do Distrito Federal.

5. A vernacular building technique in which a woven framework of wooden sticks or bamboo (wattle) grid is infilled with a mixture of earth, clay, and sometimes straw or dung (daub), forming walls that are then left exposed or plastered.
6. Refers to the people that worked on the construction site of Brasília.



Figure 4. Photograph of the Cruzeiro. Arquivo Público do Distrito Federal.



Figure 4A. Photograph of an ephemeral structure during Brasília's construction phase. Casa da Arquitetura, Porto.

The relation between the antiindividualism of modern architecture and the anonymous character of popular art approaches the notion of “formal miscegenation” identified by Mário de Andrade and Lúcio Costa (quoted in Wisnik 2008). Relevant specifically in the Brazilian case by an intentional and explicit relation between popular manifestation and erudite, defended both by Lucio Costa and Mário de Andrade.

As Wisnik (2008) notes, “symptomatically, the modern reconstruction of this anonymous and rural culture, for Mário de Andrade and Lúcio Costa, takes place from a position of clear opposition to the world of commodities and private bourgeois patronage, dominated by the debased bad taste of foreign mimicry.”⁷ Within this framework, the resulting architectural language can be read through an expression coined by Sérgio Ferro: *brutalismo caboclo*⁸ — a singular form of expressiveness produced by the friction between technical invention and rustic means, where construction is neither fully industrial nor purely vernacular, but critically suspended between the two.

Against Niemeyer's *Depoimento* (1958), this tension becomes more pronounced, when the architect proclaims his search for conciseness and purity, suppressing the superfluous to reveal “structural truth.”⁹ Yet the mass revealed precisely the opposite:

in stripping the structure down, what appeared was not formal purity but the tropical rusticity of the construction site as a founding local mark. It is in this gap that the interpretation resonates with Fred Coelho's (2020) characterisation of Brazil as a frustration that “takes hold when narratives of destruction impose themselves on projects that sought to overcome them.”¹⁰ Between the modernist gesture and vernacular improvisation, the First Mass emerges as an emblem of this frustration and, precisely for that reason, as a revelatory exhibitionary gesture of an originary Brazilian architecture, rendered contradictory through its resistance.

Within this reading, Niemeyer seems to anticipate the next steps of Brazilian architecture, an argument strengthened by Sophia Telles's remarks on Brasília:

*Niemeyer's architecture can only project itself through the fluctuation of the horizon, and submission to broad spaces is what ultimately defines the scale of his drawing. It is this memory of the surface that São Paulo's architects would eventually build under the shadow of large roofs, conferring upon their spaces a sense of continuity.*¹¹

7. Guilherme Wisnik, “Plástica e anonimato: modernidade e tradição em Lucio Costa e Mário de Andrade,” *Novos Estudos*, 2007.
8. Sérgio Ferro, *Arquitetura e trabalho livre* (Cosac Naify, 2006), 255.
9. Oscar Niemeyer, *Depoimento* (Editora Perspectiva, 1961).

10. Fred Coelho, “O Brasil como frustração,” *Serrote* 31, 2019.
11. Sophia S. Telles, “Brasília – O desenho da superfície,” in *Brasília: antologia crítica*, edited by Alberto Xavier and Julio Roberto Katinsky (Cosac Naify, 2012), 329.

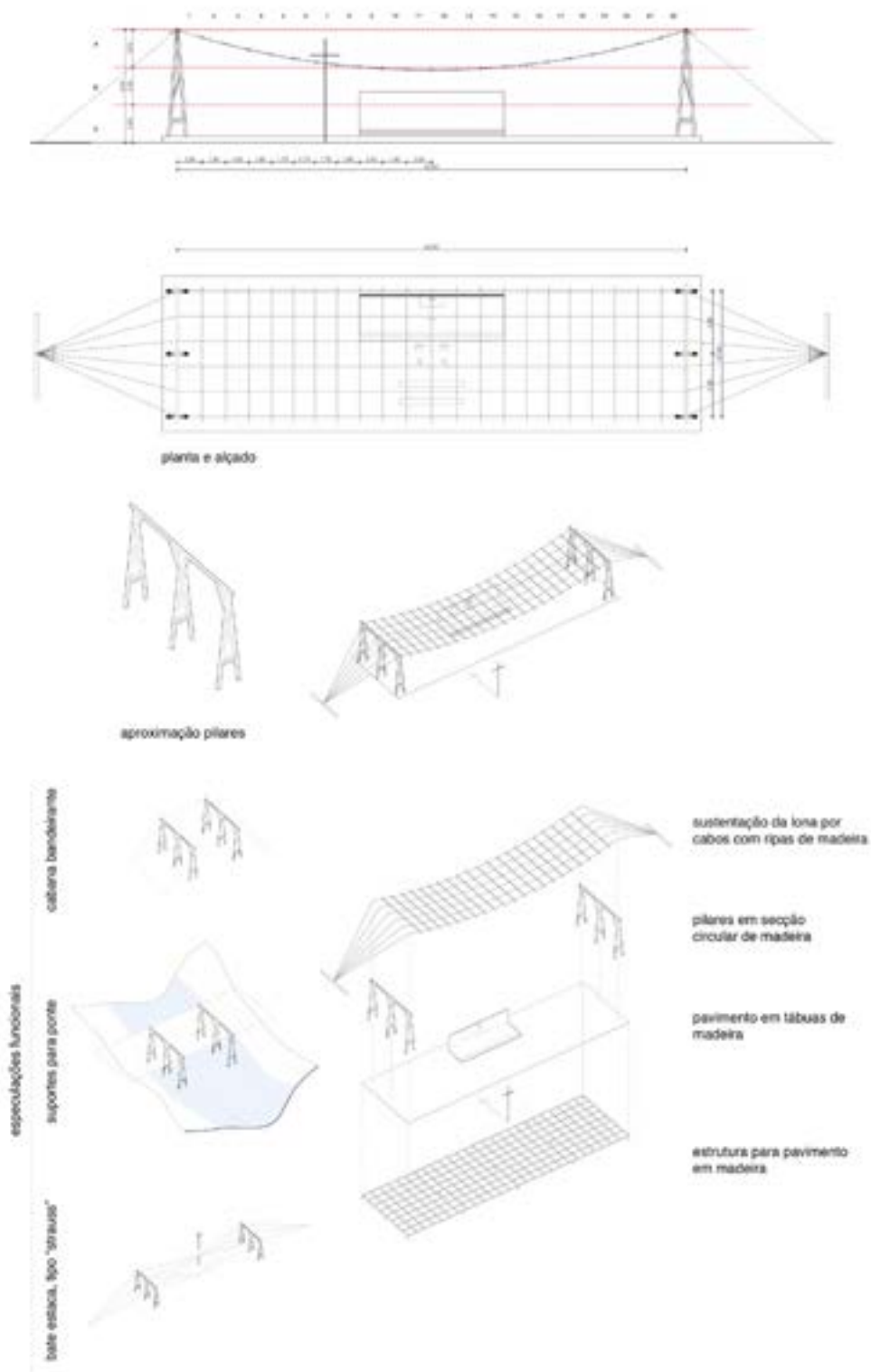


Figure 5. Altar for the First Mass in Brasília (1957). Drawings produced by the author.



Figure 6. Brazilian Pavilion in Brussels. *Revista Manchete* 316, 1958.

2. The Pavilion: modernist image-making through building

The Brazilian Pavilion in Brussels (1958) is introduced in this analysis from a projectual and visual perspective that shares not only its chronological and morphological proximity to the altar but also a common objective: to disseminate the image of JK's Brazil, albeit to different audiences. The content of the exhibition titled "Civilization in the Tropics" followed the circulation of an itinerant curatorial project by Lício Pontual/Henrique Mindlin concerning the construction of Brasília,¹² commissioned by the Cultural Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is important to point out that the goal of the exhibition was to present Brazil as a booming country in an European scenario, having Brasília – or better, its imaginarium of industrialization and progress – as the bright star to be shown.

The comparison between the pavilion and the altar reveals the political logic underlying both the building and its exhibition, shaped by Juscelino Kubitschek's commitment to projecting an image of national progress. While the altar exposes labor through the contingencies of its construction site, the pavilion suppresses such origins: its resources and diplomatic context preclude labor from entering the architectural

discourse, at least at the level of its visible surfaces. By examining the constructive methods and material strategies employed to produce a similar morphology, this comparison brings to light a concealed repertoire of techniques and references that operates beneath the pavilion's representational façade.

If the First Mass was an event mediated internally, the pavilion functioned as its international counterpart, presenting the country as a symbol of industrial development, translated architecturally through the apparent success of its technique. The building also had a playful character, expressed through an impluvium in the roof that could be covered by a floating balloon which rose and fell according to meteorological conditions. The interior space was filled with tropical plants arranged by Burle Marx, reinforcing the pastoral-tropical character announced in the panels layered over the façade.

In terms of morphology, the resemblance to the Brasília tent is significant: the four metal supports in triangular configuration recall the structures previously examined (Figure 7-7A); and the parabolic roof – this time with concrete blocks replacing canvas – appeals to the same sense of lightness and simplicity. In any case, the change in material entirely alters the economy of means present in the former case, rendering its construction a structurally complex and costly endeavor.

12. Ana Luiza Nobre, "A feira mundial de Bruxelas de 1958: o pavilhão brasileiro / Brussels World's Fair of 1958: The Brazilian Pavilion," *ArqTexto* 16, (2011).



Figure 7, Figure 7A. First Mass in Brasília (1957) / Brazilian Pavilion at Expo Brussels (1958). Arquivo Público do Distrito Federal / © Acervo Sérgio Bernardes.

“A hanging roof”¹³ was how the international press understood the parabolic concrete canopy designed by Sérgio Bernardes to house the Brazilian exhibition. The article published in *The Architectural Review* explored the theme of tensioned roofs in five pavilions built for the Expo, highlighting construction technique as an innovation for which world’s fairs offered fertile ground. The authors also inscribed this type of roof within the history of architecture by mentioning several precedents, notably Frei Otto’s structures (Figure 8), deemed successful in both design and execution.

Renate Prince and Richard Hobin’s assessment begins with a question that can be revisited for this argument: “Have the designers at Brussels at least assimilated

13. Renate Prince and Richard Hobin, “The Hanging Roof,” *The Architectural Review* 124, (1958): 132–136.

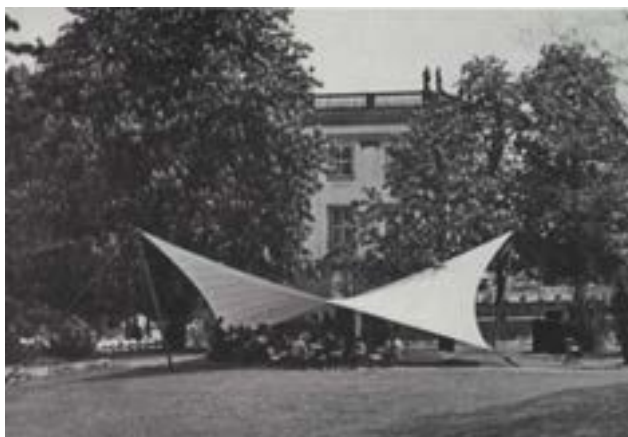


Figure 8. Garden and Flower Exhibition, with structures designed by Frei Otto. Bandstand, Kassel, 1955. MoMA NY.

the existing knowledge [about hanging roofs] and if so have they contributed anything new?”¹⁴ In the Brazilian case, the answer begins to take shape, with the authors concluding that the response would be ‘no’ to both questions. In analyzing the pavilion and its structure, the article identifies that the weight of the concrete roof is not supported by the four triangular towers but by slender metal columns disguised to resemble supports for large display panels on the exterior. According to their analysis, the triangular towers have no structural impact and act merely as decorative elements intended to fulfill a preconceived architectural idea.

*It seems that the designers of this pavilion had some preconceived idea of a light structure — a thin membrane between four thin pylons — but they have chosen a structural form where stability is directly dependent on weight. Faced with this dilemma, the designers have chosen to express a make-believe structure and to disguise the actual columns, which appear to do no more than hold up the decorative screens, are heavily plated on the inside and actually carry four-fifths of the load of the roof, whereas the four ‘main’ pylons could probably be omitted altogether.*¹⁵

14. Prince and Hobin, “The Hanging Roof”.

15. Ibid.

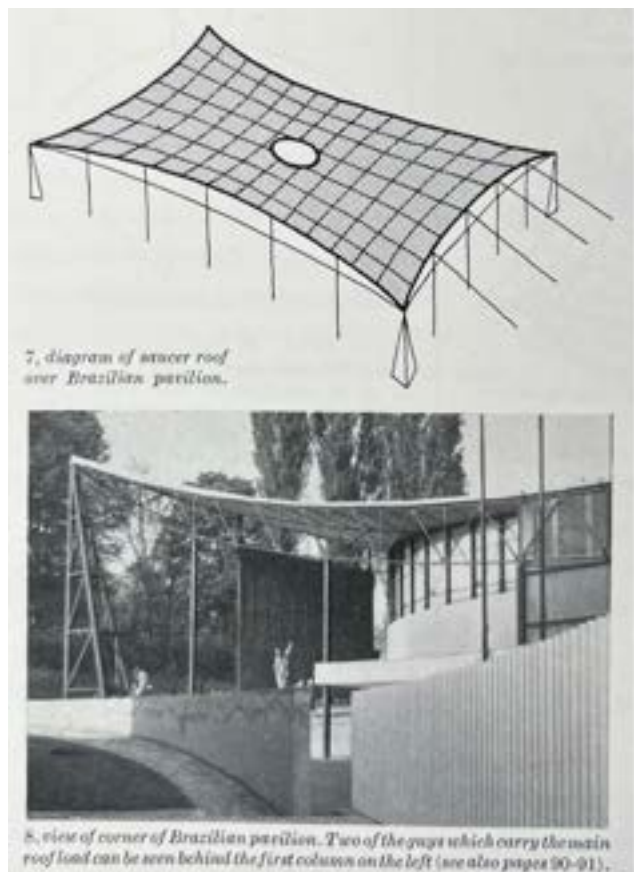


Figure 9. Structural diagram of the Brazilian Pavilion in Brussels. *The Architectural Review*, 1958.

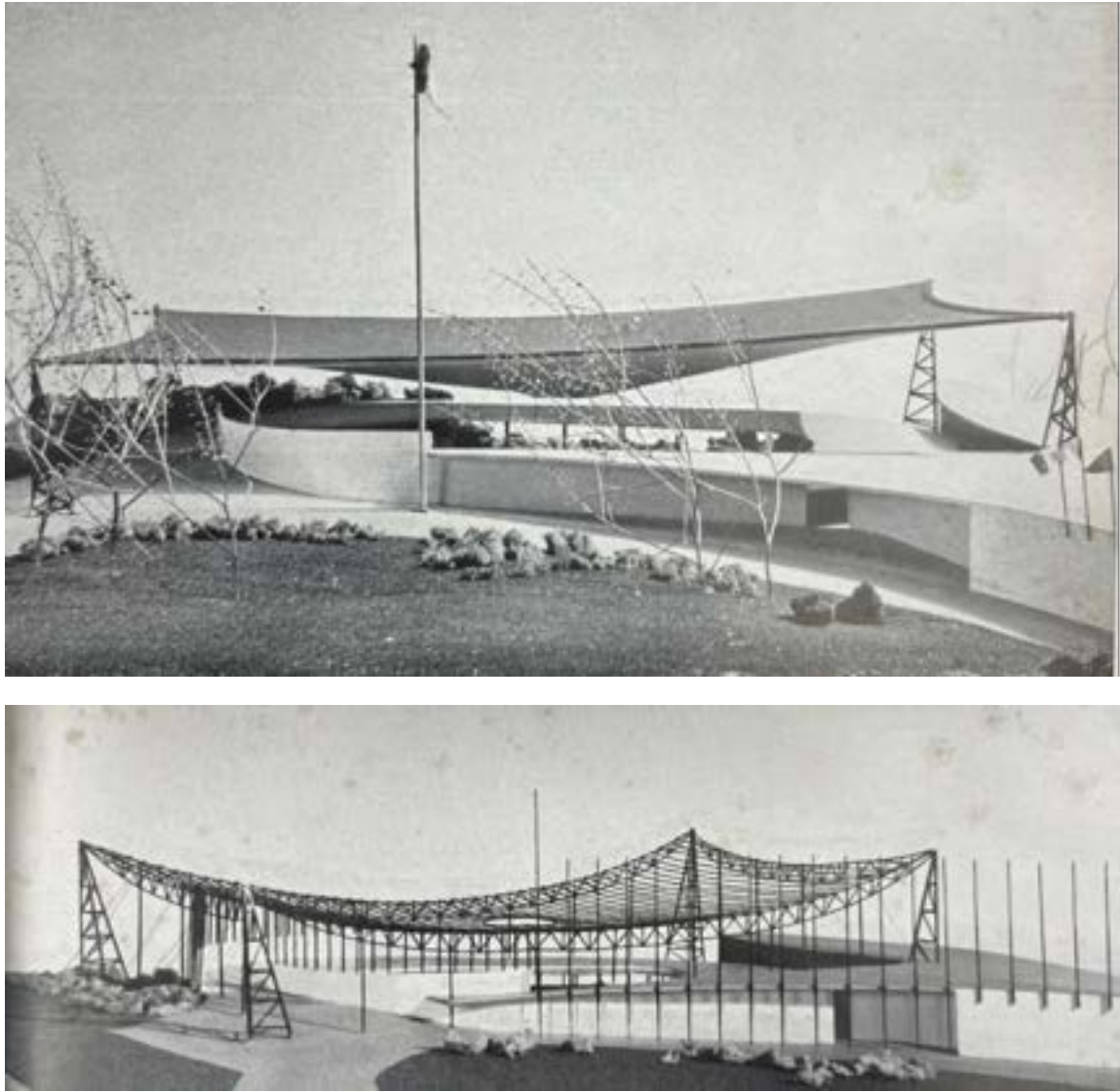


Figure 10, Figure 10A. Models for the Brazilian Pavilion in Brussels. *Revista Módulo* 9, 1958.

Issue n.º 9 of *Revista Módulo* (1958)¹⁶ also featured the pavilion, though under a patriotic discourse that highlighted it as supposedly the best building of the Exhibition. The pages dedicated to the project consist only of photographs of the models and a brief descriptive text, without showing photographs of the built structure. Apparently, two models were made: one architectural (Figure 10) and another structural (Figure 10A), sharing a common base.

In the architectural model (Figure 10), where the canvas stretched over tensioned cables can be seen, the slender metal pillars are absent. Conversely, in the structural model (Figure 10A), their presence is evident, despite efforts to disguise them with a dozen masts placed in front of the building. The short text refers to the structural system, stating that “the supports will be trussed and separated by spans of 60 and 40 meters”, which contradicts the precise analysis published in the

English journal. The superimposition of the two models makes clear the discrepancy between appearance and structural logic, with the morphology of the roof differing completely between the versions presented.

Regarding the publication in the Brazilian magazine, it is important to situate the article on the pavilion within the issue’s broader content. The issue where the project was published is historically significant for publishing Niemeyer’s aforementioned “Depoimento”,¹⁷ in which he stresses the importance of considering “[...] the conveniences of unity and harmony among the buildings and, furthermore, that these should no longer be expressed by their secondary elements, but by the structure itself, duly integrated into the original plastic conception.”¹⁸ Immediately following this purported redemption, the Belgian pavilion is presented, operating precisely through a disguised structure.

16. *Revista Módulo* 9, (1958).

17. Niemeyer, *Depoimento*.

18. *Revista Módulo* 9, (1958).

In the typological and archetypal dimension, tensioned roofs are a recurring theme in Bernardes's work. His projects are known for experiments involving cables and metal structure as a design challenge. In this context, predating the Belgian case is the pavilion for the Companhia Siderúrgica Nacional [CSN] (1954) (Figure 11), an ephemeral structure built over a bridge in Ibirapuera Park. The building was conceived as an exhibition object in itself, demonstrating steel's potential as a construction material. Located in the same park that housed Niemeyer's works, the steel pavilion stood out for its innovative construction techniques, creating a suspended exhibition space over the lake. It was recognized as a manifesto of modernity,¹⁹ reinforcing the tent archetype as a symbol of a situated Brazilian modernity.

Although formally close, the buildings differ structurally. In the case of the CSN pavilion, the structure genuinely defines the form without resorting to additional supports, as occurs in the international pavilion. In this respect, transposing the technique to the foreign context did not necessarily entail assimilating the knowledge Bernardes had already explored, reinforcing the theory that the Brussels project originated from a preconceived image. The CSN pavilion helps situate Bernardes's work within the international debates of the time, in which tensioned roofs were a relevant topic among avant-garde segments of modern architecture.

Although it is not possible to conclude that the tent for the First Mass was in Bernardes's imagination when designing the Brussels pavilion, it is highly likely that the CSN pavilion was. Beyond the formal similarities between the two projects, one of the architect's sketches for the pavilion shows the drawing of a similar

19. A. Bahia, "Pavilhão da CSN 1954: Recorrência técnica e manifesto de modernidade," *Anais do 11º Seminário Nacional do Docomomo Brasil*, Recife, 2016.

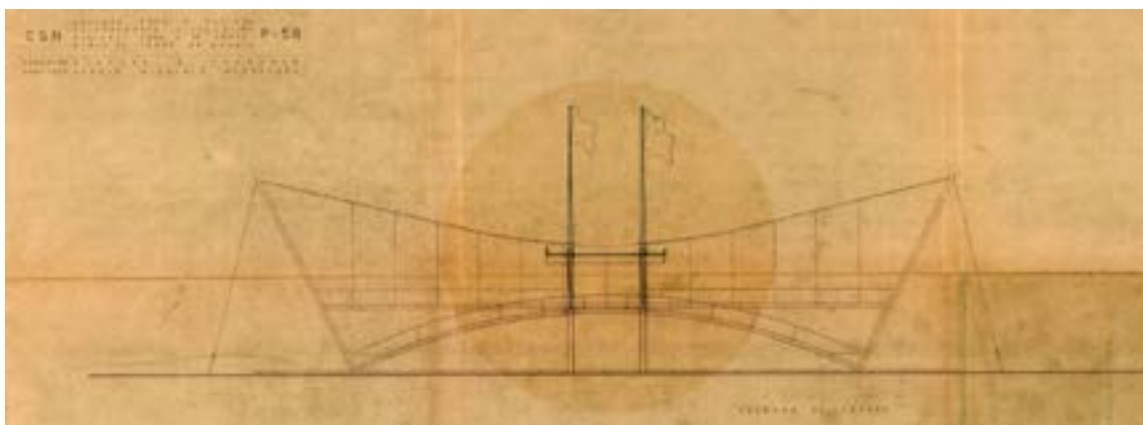


Figure 11. Initial drawing for the CSN Pavilion. Acervo Sérgio Bernardes.

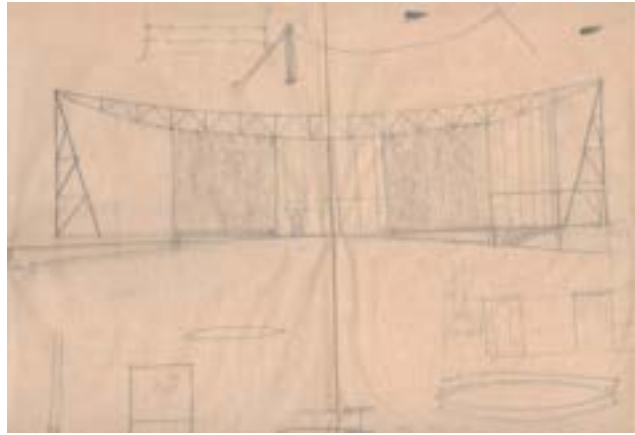


Figure 12. Drawing by Sérgio Bernardes for the Brussels Pavilion. NPD FAU UFRJ.

tension system — with cables extending above the roof — directly above the drawing of the final elevation, clearly recalling the CSN façade and, consequently, the mass.

3. Cultural center: fetish and surface

In the mid-1970s, news began circulating about a new cultural space for Brasília. The building, then proposed by Sérgio Bernardes, took shape under the same archetype: a tent, an attempt to bring concrete closer to nature. The idea was, from the outset, bold and avant-garde, featuring a green roof and a fluid association between interior and exterior, proposing spaces surrounded by water. The model published several times in *Correio Braziliense* shows a building very similar to the Belgian pavilion, especially in the design of its curved roof with a circular opening (impluvium) for collecting rainwater in a cascading system.

With a tent-shaped roof, entirely covered with plastic grass, the Cultural Space will house a built area of 40,000 square meters. Indoor and outdoor gardens surround the tent, which will be encircled by a waterfall, already named the 'Festival of Waters'. [...] This tent will be formed by two lateral blocks that will accommodate the administration,

*studios, libraries, machine rooms, an arms museum, the advisers' room, and collegiate bodies, where the structural cables forming the tent will be anchored.*²⁰

However, the development of the project could not unfold as smoothly as its concept suggested. Amid economic crises, construction was halted for several years between 1974 and 1977, and the previously estimated budget proved insufficient to complete the project, resulting in its delayed inauguration in 1979. Throughout these interruptions, the architect was also asked to add a convention center to the initial proposal, which ultimately led to the extension of the lateral volumes, compromising the proportional relationships of what had been a concise form.

The relationship between the international pavilion and the tent for the Mass goes beyond simple temporal proximity and acquires architectural substance through this project. Bernardes's design becomes part of the "tent" chronology: the building — initially called the Espaço Cultural de Brasília (later the CCB, or Espaço Cultural Ulysses Guimarães from 1992 onwards) — was constructed on a block near the site where the inaugural Mass had been celebrated, also along the Monumental Axis. The building's morphology and construction methods seem to enact, in their own way, a synthesis between the altar and the pavilion. Its program resembled that of a civic center, also housing the headquarters of the Cultural Foundation of the Federal District.

The building, made of reinforced concrete and marked by a strong brutalist expression, is organized around two portico-like towers that anchor the steel cables responsible for shaping the parabolic elevation. These cables support a concrete slab that, as in the tent typology, appears to float. Added to this system are two suspended lateral blocks, as if embedded into the towers. This recomposition — a suspended roof producing a continuous, shaded public space — reinforces the "memory of the surface that Paulista projects would ultimately construct under the shadow of large canopies" (Telles 2012). Here, the radical gesture shifts from the object to the adjacent public space, structured by the relationship between the exterior staircases and the large courtyard framed by the lateral volumes, with landscaping by Burle Marx.

*Employing at certain stages more than 1,200 workers, the Center presents a structure of concrete and Corten steel (1,476 tons) and a suspended roof composed of 52 steel cables of 1½ inches, each weighing about 1,500 kilos.*²¹



Figure 13. The model for the Espaço Cultural de Brasília. *Correio Braziliense*, January 9, 1973.

Labour re-enters the architectural discourse, but no longer as an image legible in the material contingencies of construction. Instead, it appears as sheer productive force, measured by the quantity of workers mobilized to materialize the project. This shift — from labour as visible practice in the altar, where making and improvisation inscribe themselves directly onto form, to labour as abstract power in the cultural center — signals a profound transformation in the relationship between architecture, production, and representation. What is no longer exhibited is the act of making itself, but the capacity to command and organize work at scale. In this sense, the building marks a passage from a modern condition, in which labour could still emerge as a constitutive image of architecture, to a postmodern regime in which labour is subsumed by image-making, reduced to an invisible infrastructure that sustains form without informing its meaning.

If we return to the question posed by the English periodical — “Have the designers at Brussels at least assimilated the existing knowledge [about hanging roofs] and if so, have they contributed anything new?” — and apply it to this project, we can identify characteristics that point toward the complexification of the model:

- (A) the explicit dissociation between cables and roof, in a system where the latter is “hung” rather than integrated into the structural thickness;
- (B) the incorporation of the lateral blocks as counterweights and as tectonic justification for the towers;
- (C) the fusion between the roof and the planes enclosing the central space, through a grid pattern that provides formal cohesion.

The reappearance of this form in comparison to the altar, and reinforced by the future of the project, establishes a direct connection with Sérgio Ferro's concept of the “fetish-form,” in which “the fetish-

20. *Correio Braziliense*, March 8, 1974.

21. *Correio Braziliense*, March 12, 1979.



Figure 14. The Centro Cultural Brasília and the relation with the monumental axe of the city. Flávio R. Cavalcanti, 2003.

form erases the contradictions of production relations inscribed in the temporality of labor (value is time) within the immobile spatiality of plastic forms.”²² In this sense, Ferro warns that “the alibis of pseudo-functions and anticipations (and others, such as integration with the site, symbolic intention, typology, etc.) consistently resort to a vocabulary alien to that of concrete making. Architectural form thus enters into a poor chiasmus with myth.”²³

A comparison with Brasília’s purism accentuates the disruptive nature of the project: Bernardes challenges Niemeyer’s refined vocabulary and exposes the building’s “viscera,” coming closer to the logic of the altar. In doing so, he summons history — through citations or the exploration of a structural model — into the core of the design gesture itself. As Sérgio Ferro

22. Ferro, *Arquitetura e trabalho livre*, 302.

23. *Ibid.*



Figure 15. The Centro Cultural Brasília and the structural system. Arquivo Público do Distrito Federal, 1977.

notes about Niemeyer, we can overlap with Bernardes case:

*“In Niemeyer’s architecture up to Pampulha and Ibirapuera, production still mattered: constructive elements and some labor appeared in the result. In Brasília, with the goal of achieving pure volumes, a period begins in which the coating, the surface layer, comes to dominate. (...) In the plasticity of that period, the indices, the marks of production, disappear. That is why the buildings seem to have no history, since only the indices carry living memory. Thus there is continuity, similarity between the plasticity of the city and its components: an immediate leap from drawing to execution.”*²⁴

The building’s current state bears little relation to Bernardes’s original proposal. Like the Mass tent and the Brussels pavilion, the project did not withstand time — or, more precisely, the successive layers that accumulated over its initial conception. In 1990, Bernardes was invited to design an expansion for the complex; near the end of his life, he partnered with the firm Mayehorfer & Toledo, which assumed the project after his death. This authorial instability, far from being merely biographical, becomes decisive: the building begins to incorporate not an evolution but a rupture, materialized in an addition that radically subverts the design logics of the 1979 scheme (Figure 16).

The intervention adopts an unmistakably postmodern language, interpreting the building not as a system but as a surface. Through prefabricated panels, standardized window frames, and large mirrored glass panes, Bernardes’s work is literally enveloped,

24. Ferro, *Arquitetura e trabalho livre*, 310.

transformed into the backdrop for a new formal narrative. The exposed structure — once the protagonist and symbolic engine of the building — is relegated to a residual role. Only a small portion of the parabolic profile remains visible, and even this remnant is reduced to an anecdotal sign, an involuntary ornament that no longer carries the project’s experimental intent, its structural genealogy, or the public ambition of the original design.

The result is the transformation of the building into a hybrid object, whose reading becomes interrupted and fragmented. The coherence between technique, form, and space dissolves beneath the new skin, which privileges immediate image over constructive articulation. In this metamorphosis, the Espaço Cultural Ulysses Guimarães ceases to interrogate its own architectural tradition and becomes an artifact of its time, shaped by a market-oriented logic giving literal life for Ferro’s concept of fetish in architecture. By emptying the original proposal of its investigative and experimental character, the expansion undermines the possibility of reading the building as part of the experimental lineage that linked the Mass tent, the pavilion, and the cultural center as agents of a “fetish-form,” thereby obscuring a divergent pathway within Brazilian modern architecture.

4. Conclusion

In what ways do the case studies contribute to a national theory of architecture exhibition through building?

Taken together, the tent of the First Mass in Brasília, the Brazilian Pavilion in Brussels, and the Espaço Cultural Ulysses Guimarães outline a possible genealogy for a theory of architectural expography in Brazil. Despite their distinct typologies — altar, pavilion, and cultural center — the three cases converge through a shared architectural logic: large, open volumes structured by the ground plane, suspended roofs, and a performative use of form that transforms architecture into a narrative device. More than functional structures, they operate as exhibitionary buildings, staging symbolic and political meanings through architectural means.

Their differences, however, are crucial. The altar emerges from an anonymous and contingent constructive process, in which manual labor and improvisation remain visible and operative. The pavilion, marked by strong architectural authorship and diplomatic intent, suppresses these origins, converting technique into an image of industrial progress addressed to an international audience. The Espaço Cultural Ulysses Guimarães radicalizes this lineage by fetishizing structure itself, transforming technical expression into autonomous language — an operation later neutralized by its postmodern expansion, which replaces constructive articulation with a continuous, machine-assisted envelope. Read in sequence, these projects reveal not the consolidation of a national canon, but a field of tensions between the dissemination of local constructive knowledge and the inscription of modernity as image.



Figure 16. The Centro Cultural Brasília after the expansion. Igo Estrela, 2024.

This genealogy allows the altar of the First Mass to be reconsidered not as an unpretentious or merely vernacular construction, but as part of an experimental architectural field grounded in continuity and investigation. Across the three cases, different modes of interaction between morphology and construction emerge, shaped by distinct regimes of labor: from exposed craftsmanship and assemblage, to industrial abstraction, to structural fetishization. In this sense, labor operates not as a social background, but as an architectural operator that regulates what architecture chooses to reveal or conceal about its own production.

Understood as architectural expographies, these buildings do not merely host exhibitions; they exhibit themselves. They convert means into language and expose, in different registers, the contradictions that shaped Brazilian modernity: between tradition and deviation, technique and image, promise and frustration. Rather than affirming a stable national theory, this genealogy proposes a critical horizon in which Brazilian architecture emerges through friction. It is precisely in its capacity to expose the building site, to expose fiction, and to expose structure as an image that the enduring critical force of Brazilian modernity can be found, one capable of informing contemporary architectural debate.

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