

MADOLON VRIESENDORP

Interview by Otavio Pereira de Maghalaes

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The exhibition « Lina Bo Bardi: Together was curated by Noemi Blager, filmed by Tapio Snellman, designed by Assemble and the workshop, artwork and collection by myself into which we all had a collective input. It was held for the first time in London in 2012 - two years before the hundredth anniversary of Lina Bo Bardi. Since that time, it has travelled around the world and made an important contribution in promoting one of the 20th century's leading personalities within architecture. Nevertheless, your exhibition does not show her architectural works. How does one exhibit an architect without showing her buildings? What was the "together" which you aimed to render visible?

That was the whole idea, we did not want to create an 'architectural' exhibition of Lina. We wanted to show the other side of her, which is the excitement about Brazil's culture, the collecting and what she discovered there. Objects made by unschooled people were attractive to her. Tapio Snellman made a fantastic film of whatever activities take place in SESC, the textures he and Lina both found in Brazil: the tiles, the metalwork, the woodwork, the bricks. We concentrated on SESC, because it's her ultimate architectural & cultural masterpiece! She was working on it for around 10 years, inspired everyone around her, and made amendments on the spot. She told a carpenter "you have to carve a wooden chicken, a fish, some fruit, and put it in a box outside the restaurant, so people will see what they can eat here". He protested that he couldn't do that; to which she said: "yes, you can and you must". So he did it and was fantastically proud he had managed to make it, and it is still there, in a box in front of the restaurant.

This is why it wasn't a classic architectural exhibition, it shows relations between people ?

Yes, Tapio showed all the ways people could enjoy the building, the way it was intended to be. She embraced all people, from every different culture in Brazil. She was incredibly excited to find such a variety, making high, low and popular-Art.

Did you have the same type of feeling in Bahia?

Yes, Bahia was fantastic, and I can imagine her excitement going there and finding Christian and Voodoo cultures living together in harmony. The practice of Voodoo had been already influenced by Christianity when the missionaries came to Africa, they found masks with horns, and so they were perceived as devils. They brought Christian guilt and punishment into the equation. That's how the EXU (pronounced Eshu) came into existence. He's a devil, almost childlike, who is an important part of the celebrations (Candomblé). He's used to go to the specific deity and asks for favors, but he is fickle and not to be entirely trusted to get you what you asked for. I decided to make very large EXUS for the exhibition, as Lina had some in her collection.

Could you tell me about the workshop in Solar do Unhão?

In Solar do Unhão we wanted to show what she did there. There were workshops, so we did a workshop with the children from the favela next door. There is a funny thing

about the favelas. This favela is located right next to the Solar do Unhão, with a beautiful view of the sea, an amazing spot! From where the children jump directly in the sea! After the workshop, they dragged us there, and we were shown around the brightly painted houses and mozaïcs they made. We kissed the mothers and the grandmothers and then they showed us how they made different shapes in the air while jumping into the water. It was all a very moving experience.

But did you have a specific subject to work with them?

No, just like the tradition in Brazil, we specifically wanted them to take everything we found to make things out of. So we asked them to take whatever they had at home to be binned like boxes and bottles, and bring it to the workshop. So they made angels from plastic bottles, and all the things they longed for; a beautiful room with modern furniture. One made a blue laptop from cardboard, very beautiful. And chairs, we taught them how to make Lina's chair from boxes. At one point one of the mothers came to make chairs, and the chairs got bigger and bigger and as we were packing all their cardboard objects she implored us to take them. We were so sorry because we couldn't as they were too big! I am sure she has made a whole little factory of cardboard chairs. She was so excited.

Who came up with the idea of going to Bahia? Was it part of the exhibition or a means to discover, to get closer to Lina Bo Bardi's spirit?

Yes, it was Noemi Blager, the curator, who simply told us what to do. Because we both went separately in 2006 to Brazil, and discovered Lina at the same time. Zaha Hadid, (a friend who died recently) was a fan, and she told me to see Lina's work. She went there earlier and wanted to visit her, but Lina said: "no, I have no time to see anyone".

Lina located this amazing spot, an old harbour in Salvador, and converted it into a museum, restaurant and workshops. It was a very difficult time for women, they had to fight hard to get their way, to be able to do things. Who was going to pay for women's designs? To just convince people that you are capable, in that macho-society, was very hard, because, of course, architects like Oscar Niemeyer were the ones who got to build everything. If she were not married to Pietro Maria Bardi, she would have never been able to build her Museum. She was always looking for something significant to do. So when she found out that they wanted to tear down those factories in SESC Pompeia, she stepped in and said: "We have to save it". I don't believe there would have been another architect who could have put so much into a 'conversion' at that scale, as 'tabula rasa' is the dream of every architect. But she thought, those buildings, already housing a community center, were perfect for a large scale cultural center serving the whole community. So in those buildings, formally a barrel factory, she designed a library with comfortable chairs, an art gallery, places for reading, playing games and doing homework, numerous workshops, restaurant and a large sports building housing a swimming pool. She was spontaneous and involved with every detail. When they stacked breeze blocks together, cement sticking out on both sides, they assured her that they would make it all smooth, but she answered: no! It looks very beautiful, rough and elegant! She would always combine roughness and elegance.

Although always listening to people's ideas...

..... She always wanted to be close to people, always willing to rethink her ideas, and be in the moment. So she worked on SESC for ten years, constantly interfering. In the end, they considered her a pest! But of course she just managed to make it incredibly beautiful and useful, even if she declared that beauty wasn't her priority. When she designed the library, she realized, if people develop their minds, they will have to develop bodies and need physical activities; a swimming pool and a gym. It was just an incredibly modern way of thinking.

You organized this exhibition with Naomi Blager. How did your encounter emerge?

Naomi recruited me to save a very original 70's building that was near her house (it was torn down). We live very close to each other, but we had never met before. She invited me for dinner with her friends and Rowan Moore, one of the best architectural critics in England. I told him of my trip to Brazil and that he should write about Lina Bo Bardi. In those days, if you asked people in the street of Sao Paulo who built the museum, the answer was always: "Oscar Niemeyer". She was mostly unknown, although Aldo van Eyck had written about her decades before.

How did the idea of the exhibition come out?

Then Noemi told me that she has always wanted to do something about Lina Bo Bardi. So we agreed we should do something! She immediately did everything she could to organize an exhibition. We both decided that we didn't want an exhibition of architectural drawings, but an exhibition that represents the 'spirit' of Lina; her excitement and discovery of Brazil. Because exhibitions are always showing architecture without people in it, with only the architecture, plans and all the models which are obscure to most visitors. That's why we wanted an exhibition where you only saw people, how they used the buildings. So we asked Tapio, who had made films for numerous architects. So he went to SESC, and filmed everything that was happening there. He filmed rock bands, dance & music and theatre; he also filmed the rain beautifully! It was amazing to see how the rainwater poured down the beautiful mozaically paved walkways and drains. All these little details, that she had invented for drains, with beautiful stones, everything appeared to move in the stream. He filmed it all; the soaking wet children running down the streets, people eating, people dancing, people swimming... And one of the things that struck me most, was that she made this gymnasium; each floor represents one season. So she painted all the different sports activities on the floor. What was incredibly exciting to me is that now people are playing sports on works of art, on abstract paintings! To always combine art and architecture in every detail, was her particular genius. This attention to detail, the democracy in all the elements of it, and the humour and inventiveness, seems to me particularly female, the extreme practical side of it. It was not sentimental, but delicate, sensitive, made with few means but everything was...impulsive!

That is how people move in her buildings; they are the space managers. It is a freedom space.

Exactly, some architects design their particular building wherever, their fingerprint, their signature. No! You have to design and be specific, that's what's great about her, that she made everything very specific for specific ends. In the library, there are little

cubicles, for children who cannot study at home, because it is too messy and noisy with many other children, they can study here on these beautiful round tables. That is amazing about her, everything is possible - but in very specific places, and that's was so great. And also visually, everything was very rough, but incredibly elegant. So the more rough it was, the more beautiful it became.

Do you think that contemporary architecture could learn from her way of projecting her views?

Firstly, being there when it gets built. And all the time, you have to be a chef d'orchestre conducting all the people who are playing different instruments - constructing different parts of the building. See what inspires them and make them believe in it. One incredible story happened. Some workers thought that some bad spirit had invaded part of the building. So they didn't want to come to work. She immediately organized some service with a priest, I don't know if he was an authentic priest, or if somebody acted as the priest. In that haunted part of the building she orchestrated a kind of ritual where they would expel that bad spirit from the building. She was dressed in a long robe, like the priest and they were all told to come to the ceremony. So they exorcised the bad spirit from the building and they all came back to work the next day! She really enjoyed the theatricality of it.

It shows her playfulness, her humour, her brilliantly open mind.

And did Assemble Studio were introduced by Naomi Blager?

Noemi Blager is fantastic at bringing people together She found this great group of architects who build everything together. For instance, they found an old petrol station and they turned it into a pop-up cinema. They built all kinds of curious objects, they will find things, transform them or build something new. So, she thought these people would understand Lina very well. She explained what Lina was all about and they had an immediate rapport, they said "Yes, we can do rough and elegant". So they made beautifully rough boxes to put the whole exhibition in with very, very elegant legs.

So there was a great sense of communication between you two?

Yes, we understood each other perfectly. And we always get on very well with the people we work with. Tapio, the film maker already understood everything, through his own natural attention to detail. He filmed the children from the favela while they were very happily making things, and made a beautiful filmic collage of all their portraits. He knew to put his own sense of humour and artistic view into his film, and into the music. So we had an incredible team really. Noemi went to the Lina Bo Bardi Institute, and said: "I know an Italian furniture maker; Arper, who could replicate Lina's designs and then fund some of your projects and keep the whole Institute open, as they had struggled financially.. So she pushed Arper and said: "Why don't you produce this bowl chair? -- It has never been produced before. So they made this bowl chair, they looked meticulously at all the drawings. Noemi was the kind of amazingly productive person able to make everybody excited. So we went to talk to two of her close collaborators; Marcelo Suzuki, and Andre Vainer, and asked them how it was to work with her. And they told us about all the failures; projects taken by other architects, because of course, as a woman she had to compete for winning projects.

They cried and laughed with her, they loved her and went through so much with her. Marcelo almost cried again when he said it, so emotional, a very, very nice man.

Talking about small objects, did you select the objects from the Salvador market?

Yes. We went to the market looking for some objects; the same kind of things that she had selected before, and then we were struck by a big metal Exú. But it was not for sale as it didn't have a penis! So I said: "Ok, we will take it anyway and make a penis for it. Which I did, from a piece of bamboo. So now, the Exus devil has a bamboo penis and he was the inspiration for my big Exús. I made all the Exús out of cardboard tubes. The largest is 2 meters high painted like rusty metal, another one in a silver metallic appearance and another like oxidized copper. They were installed all around the exhibition, almost like lifeguards. I felt it not enough to show just the objects found and the objects made by the kids. Each exhibition was different, according to the size of the venue. We had different objects in boxes, some representing animals, people, in another box were just bridges, houses and other inanimate pieces. And I found quite amazing objects like a pot with breasts and a vagina, which was very brittle as it had not been fired. So I packed it very carefully, but it still arrived in a thousand pieces. It took me a whole day - like an extreme puzzle - to glue the pieces together again.

How much time did you have to prepare the exhibition?

I don't remember how long, but it took a long time to finish everything. I had all my friends help me. We had a full team.

Lina Bo Bardi was an artist, architect and conductor. She was everyone's psychiatrist as well, I'm sure. She was like a mother, they called her 'Mama Lina'. She was everything to everybody.

I don't believe in 'post-mortem' architecture, when an architect has died, to me that's terrible, because all they have is models, drawings and plans on paper. It doesn't work when the architect is missing. The architect has to come in, look, decide and change things when needed. Architecture has to be a living organism closely connected to the life of the architect. That was fantastic about Lina, to come there, every day during the building, and conduct the construction.

I would like to return to your position on how to recreate the presence of an architect or his work, in spite of their absence. Showing an architectural work in a museum space is always showing a split or reduced shape, even when one makes a 1:1 model. This question is also about the loyalty in the "spirit of the work", which it may also be legitimate to discuss. Who would guarantee this loyalty to the oeuvre, be more or less justifiable to make it visible, understandable? Or, to say it in other words, to whom belongs the architectural work, especially when it is placed outside of its original context?

I do not speak for 'Exhibitions on architecture or architects' or of 'loyalty', I find that there is no 'loyalty' or 'legitimacy' to the oeuvre in any exhibition, as the views of the curator take over and are loyal to her or his own opinion about the artist, and if the artist is alive then they can consult them. But in our case, Noemi and I took the view that there would be enough exhibitions about her drawings and buildings, which

would not tell her whole story, so 'Lina Bo Bardi together' is an attempt to catch the spirit of 'Lina'. Which can only aim to throw light on a tiny part of her interests, and it might have become the illegitimate brain child of all the participants, who truly believed in showing the human aspect of her work - of course always far removed from her living and breathing reality... in her case on an enormous scale!