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Life brought to buildings

A tribute to the inspirational Lina Bo Bardi

“Until man enters a building,” said Lina Bo Bardi, “climbs steps, and takes possession of the space in a ‘human adventure' which develops over time, architecture does not exist.” The small show about Bo Bardi outside the British Council's London HQ is about precisely that “human adventure”.

Bo Bardi, who died in 1992 at the age of 77, was an Italian architect who emigrated to Brazil in 1946. It was there that she flowered, creating some of the most visionary yet overlooked architecture of the modern era. The distance of São Paulo from Europe together with Brazil's cultural self-sufficiency (along with, perhaps, her sex) has caused Bo Bardi to be ignored in many western histories, although she is now fast becoming a cult figure in architecture.

Her most revered buildings, both in São Paulo, are the Museum of Art and the huge SESC Pompéia. The first of these is lifted above the ground to create a huge, sheltered public plaza; the second is a massive converted factory complex. Here Bo Bardi chose not to demolish existing industrial buildings but instead to weave new work into them.

Her architecture is big, bold and fearlessly non-picturesque, but her most important contribution was to examine how people actually use space, how they appropriate and change it. She was not the first architect to stress how buildings come alive only when they are populated; most architects pay at least some tribute to the idea. But her more famous compatriot and contemporary, Oscar Niemeyer (still going at 104), always made buildings more as objects than places, and as a result garnered far more press coverage, influence and acclaim. That is still the easier route to professional acclaim.

In deference to Bo Bardi's approach, this exhibition, curated by Noemi Blager, concentrates on how people use her buildings. Tapio Snellman's delicately beautiful films of life going on inside and around them are projected on to hanging screens. One lovely scene shows rain falling from the rooftops and gathering in a (deliberately constructed) waterfall.

Strewn around the show are concrete containers filled with the products of a collaboration between the London-based Dutch artist Madelon Vriesendorp and São Paulo children, made in Bo Bardi's buildings. A cocktail of cartoon fantasy, folk culture and local craft, the objects range from little devils and approximations of Donald Duck to robots and voodoo dolls, things which populate the space with an animistic energy.

The structure housing all this is the work of young self-build cult heroes Assemble, who were responsible for the Cineroleum cinema in a disused London petrol station in 2010 and the recently dismantled Theatre on the Fly at the

Chichester Festival Theatre. The installation is enveloped in corrugated roofing material formed into undulating walls and then peppered with shotgun pellets to create a constellation of light-holes. It is ingenious and magical, animating the front of this little-known space just off Trafalgar Square to create one of the quirkiest architecture shows you'll see this year.

‘Lina Bo Bardi: Together', British Council Gallery, London, to 30 November 2012 (www.linabobarditogether.com). Sponsored by Arper. Illustration caption: Exu, a Brazilian folk devil, from the Bo Bardi show. © The Financial Times Ltd 2012; transcription for the artist's own archive. [This is a review of the Lina Bo Bardi exhibition; Madelon Vriesendorp features as a named contributor, with her São Paulo children's collaboration shown throughout.]