

Times of complexity and bewilderment: "*Design at an Impasse*"

Premise

In the early 1980s, Italian-born architect and designer Lina Bo Bardi (1914-1992), conceived of a booklet that was both a manifesto and a testimony of her life-long struggle for a design practice grounded in everyday life. The volume was to be titled "Em tempos de grossura: O design no impasse" (In times of roughness: Design at an impasse). She never concluded the project, which was only published posthumously in 1994 and remains little known. This colloquium proposes to revisit her writings and her practice as a means for reflecting on contemporary challenges faced by contemporary designers and artists in the production of material culture. Instead of a nostalgic outlook, Bo Bardi proposed that historical documents ought to make sense in the present in order to open up new dialogues.

A design engaged in critical action

Lina Bo Bardi strived to create work that took into account the way people live. She understood that it is **human interaction** that gives design meaning and not the other way around. She imagined a world in which one could live authentically. She applied this philosophy to all her endeavors: architecture, furniture, stage and exhibition design, drawings and illustrations, writing and editing, as well as teaching. Out of all her creative works, her writing is perhaps the least known of them. Bo Bardi started out as a writer and editor for several Italian design magazines and kept on writing throughout her life. Her articles strongly respond to European and Brazilian modern historical events and make substantial references to a wide range of architectural and design theories. They are sometimes contradictory, but always compelling to read.

"Design at an Impasse"

One of the recurring subjects in Bo Bardi's writings is her concern with **industrial design and the model of industrial modernization** embraced by designers and political and cultural institutions in Brazil. She was often apprehensive and fascinated by this subject and cultivated a critical and complex attitude toward it. She was also sometimes disappointed, but did not give up easily. Architects Marcelo Suzuki and Marcelo Ferraz, who worked close to Bo Bardi at the end of her life, wrote eloquently about her doubts and her tenacity: "Despite the fact that Lina stated that 'all this is going to fall into a void' (1981), she continued to struggle, by discussing and producing new ways and possibilities for Brazilian design and architecture".

"Em tempos de grossura: Design no impasse" (In times of roughness: Design at an impasse) is her most articulated view on the challenges of design as a form of cultural practice. The volume published posthumously reads as the presentation of a stalemate in which the conditions no longer existed for an industrial production adjusted to the country's reality and people's everyday needs. The impasse revealed itself in the relationship between industrial design and the model of industrial modernization embraced by Brazilian government and designers, reminding us of continuous challenges imposed by the ever-expanding practice of global capitalism.

Question the role of industrial design

The main point is that Bo Bardi talked about Brazilian culture in particular and called into question the role of industrial design (not design as we use it today, which she considered to be a mistake, the chosen "finesse" she criticized) played in society (industrialized

society) in general. This concern was present in the exhibitions Bo Bardi organized with Martim Gonçalves as early as 1959. The term "impasse" was first expressed when Bo Bardi was the director of the Museu de Arte da Bahia. In 1961, she organized an exhibition of Francisco Brennand's sculptures, which she titled "Design no Impasse." This notion motivated her to propose the creation of a school of design that would bring craftspeople and students together as a critical response to the Ulm School model that had set intellectual and artistic roots in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. The school and the Museum of Popular Art that she created to support the school project in 1963 was ground breaking in that regard, but it did not last long as Bo Bardi left Salvador in 1964.

Planning, handicraft and popular art

A decade later, with Brazil's political military dictatorship steadily set, Bo Bardi returned to the challenges and paradoxes in the practice of design, when she published a text titled "Planejamento ambiental: o desenho no impasse" ("Environmental planning: design at an impasse") based on Tomás Maldonado's theories. Finally, in 1980, Bo Bardi began organizing her reflective and retrospective book about her experiences in Salvador, with a collection of her essays reconsidering the notions of handicraft and popular art and a selective anthology of texts by iconic artists and intellectuals active in the Nordeste in the early 1960s. She abandoned the project within a few months believing it might be too late. However, her voice is still alive thanks to the efforts and belief of her young collaborators.

Darcy Ribeiro, a well-known Brazilian anthropologist, claimed that "Bo Bardi wanted Brazil to develop an industry based on the creative abilities found in the hands of the Brazilian people. She believed they could reinvent knives and spoons, plates, shirts and shoes. There was a possibility that the world could be remade, the consumer world, like something that would resonate in our hearts."

Expanding the debate

Over 20 years later, Bo Bardi's work **and humanistic design-approach** has gained increasing interest and remains ever more relevant for today's society and design-practice, especially given the current economic, humanitarian, political, and environmental challenges we face worldwide. Between Bo Bardi's romantic impulse and contradictory writing and Ribeiro's optimism there lies the possibility to revisit the creation of symbolic material goods from a perspective that the ever-expanding Western value system struggles to maintain, but that may still offer considerable provocations, responses, and developments.

The afternoon colloquium "*Times of complexity and bewilderment: Design no Impasse*" proposes to offer a parallel debate to the current exhibition Another Reality. After Lina Bo Bardi at Stroom Den Haag. It proposes to reframe, update, and expand the cultural debate presented in Bo Bardi's critical design-thinking approach. This is an invitation to a group of architects, designers, artists, curators, and scholars to consider the 'impasses' regarding material culture that they face in their fields. The idea is not to revolve those impasse situations or to provide clear-cut answers. The idea is try to understand the different) "impasse(s)" by articulating new questions from different points of view and departing from Lina Bo Bardi's critical thinking.