

stone and grove

Angelo Bucci
2002

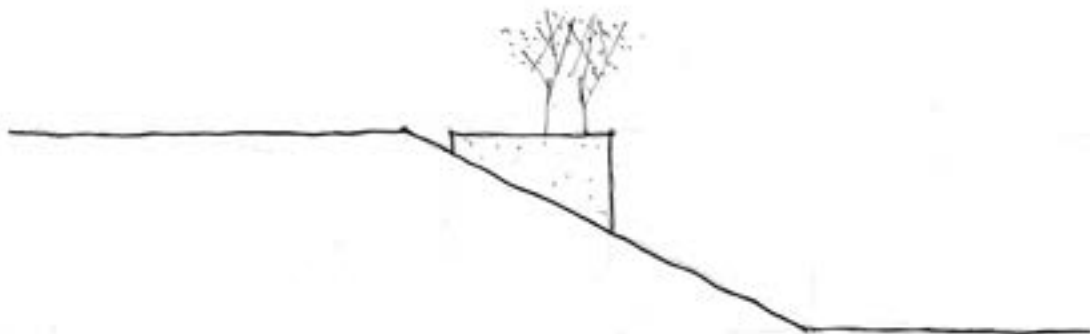
published in
D'Art 10 magazine
Monolito 1

1

Twenty years ago, the São Paulo Cultural Center was being built. At the time, during certain phases of the works, anyone who went by 23 de Maio Avenue could see the beauty of an achievement of which today, only sparing signs can be noticed. That's because the central courtyard grove in this building is much older than the building itself and has been preserved, as they say, due to a project decision. It wouldn't be noticeable at all if those trees weren't on the brink of a cliff, or more precisely, on the edge of a precarious slope that descended 20 meters in the direction of the old Itororó River valley, over which 23 de Maio Avenue already passed. To preserve this "garden", a prim with vertical reinforced-concrete walls was built to contain that box of earth that holds the trees. It was almost a perfect cube whose height was revealed as the slope descended into the valley. Hence, whoever walked down the avenue saw a hillside carefully constructed to hold a dense garden sprout. Today, that stone is like a treasure hidden in the building.

The ongoing constructions, the unfinished works, have this grace: they allow you to clearly see configuration possibilities, possibilities that the conclusion of the works tends to hide increasingly deeper. Maybe the best works are those that know how to preserve beauties that appear before they are ready, better yet, there would be works that would never be ready. And actually, maybe we can consider them that way, as always unfinished, especially when we consider that works like this, buildings, break apart as a unit to become part of the environment, part of the city. The cities are always ongoing constructions. In other words, within a modern perspective, the works, even when ready, more than ever continue being projects. Projects for other configuration possibilities.

But after all, why did that stone stay there so hidden?



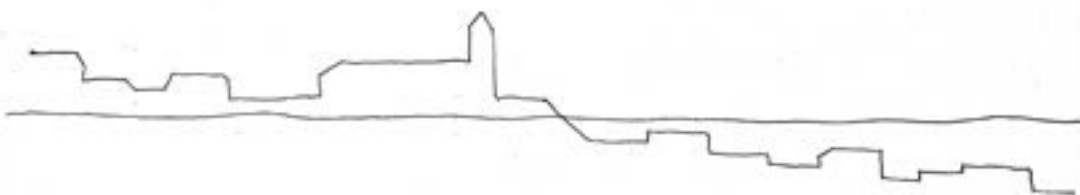
Fama is a city located at the margin of Furnas Lake in Minas Gerais. Many times, the construction of a hydroelectric station submerges parts of history. Sometimes, the natural history is lost, such as the case of Sete Quedas, drowned by Itaipu; other times, the history of civilization, as happened in Assuan in Egypt. In the later case, a sophisticated “salvage” operation spread some of the temples that would be flooded throughout the countries that contributed to the construction of the dam. In other words, the temples were carefully disassembled and “donated” to the other countries because they were in the area that would be covered by the lake. That’s why we can see the Dendur Temple at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, or the Debod Temple in the Mountain Park in Madrid. The construction of Furnas wasn’t as eloquent as Itaipu or Assuan: it only flooded rural houses, a few small villages and small towns, all this disappeared completely, it will be swept forever from the memories at the exact same moment that the last among those that lived in one of those houses swallowed by the dam ceases to exist.

But in Fama, it’s a different story. There, the main staircase of the old main church dives into the lake waters. In other words, the construction of the Furnas dam left half that city dry; there will always be the other half submerged. What was lost in Fama stayed too close to disappear or be forgotten. Its inhabitants say that in the first few years living with the lake, it was common for people not to resist the urge to see their old houses, go back to their homes, even if through a time lapse, even under muddy waters. In these incursions, drowning was a common occurrence.

In Fama, memory kills.

Walking down the shore of the sea without waves, with one foot stepping on the thin sheet of water and the other on dry land, it’s like balancing yourself on a subtle line separating two enormities: consciousness and unconsciousness. The curved line of the lake’s still water in Fama is what bonds us: going too far to one side or the other can mean drowning or drying, going away from that line imposes the loss of too many things. There we are amphibious. There, you live in an apparently ordinary, small city that begins at the edge of the lake and has very well-defined limits; what makes it extraordinary is the fact that it lives with another city, a hidden city that begins at the edge of the lake and extends under its muddy waters until it disappears, leaving us unable to clearly define where it ends.

I have the impression that all cities are somewhat similar to Fama.



What was dammed in São Paulo is a fluid made from another substance. Something that has been distilled since the city was founded.

Throughout time, São Paulo elaborated a particular way of relating with the geography of its implementation site. From the beginning, it knew how to opportunely use the “natural barriers” to protect itself from “others”. Some “others” that have been the majority: initially they were Indians; then Indians and blacks; Indians, blacks and immigrants; Indians, blacks, immigrants and finally everyone and everyone’s children together, as well as everyone that has never won anything and those that lost everything. Through how the constructions related with the geography, three periods can be recognized in São Paulo refusal, confrontation and overcoming. This becomes very clear through a retrospective lens of the so-called historical triangle, the firm highland (745 meters) where the first urban nucleus of the city was installed. The mentioned barriers are still highly noticeable to date: Anhangabaú (725 meters, original), like a throat, and Tamanduaé lea (725 meters). Like a cliff. They respectively correspond to a 20-meter-deep ditch and a big wall.



Centro Cultural São Paulo under construction. The photo shows the grove that was created in the middle of the work. This grove was original to the land. Photo: Waldemir Gomes de Lima

During the first three centuries of the city’s existence, its main nucleus stayed practically confined to that small highland; that is what characterizes the refusal period.

Throughout the 19th century, the city faced such barriers and systematically began its expansion to beyond the small highland. Then, the barriers, which before worked as defense, imposed a heavy burden upon the city’s activity. Almost one hundred years were marked by this confrontation.

The Chá overpass is the construction that signals the passage to the third period. That is, for one hundred years the entire city dreamed of the comfort of crossing the Anhangabaú emptiness in the same level, in space; a crossing that joined both highlands in identical level elevations: old downtown and new downtown. That is why the Chá overpass carries the symbolic value of making the centennial dream shared

by the entire city come true: overcoming.

But all this happened during what was practically São Paulo's pre-history. After that, the city exploded into a growth that would multiply its size, population, importance and problems many fold. Nevertheless, the first period, the one called refusal, seems to constitute one of the founding aspects of our constructive culture and to this day lives on in a great part of the building we make. It's as if it were an atavistic memory, or the permanence of the refusal. One can notice, for example, that throughout the extension of Boa Vista Street none of the existing buildings knew how to preserve the surprisingly extensive panoramic view they had in the direction of sunrise. The street, whose name describes a natural belvedere situation, doesn't make the least point of preserving anything from the enjoyment geography had offered in their constructions. Additionally, some geomorphologic characteristics of the original site would be recurrent in several other points of today's big city; the Anhangabaú, for example, reappears in several other more or less deep valleys existing in São Paulo. It's the case of the Bixiga, Saracura, Sumaré Valleys and so many others; it is also the case of the Itororó river valley, over which are the above-mentioned stone and grove.

One first answer to why the stone remains there so hidden could be the permanence of refusal.

Refusal here means what crystallized in the constructions resulting from segregation and prejudice. One can accept a simplified description of the geographic characteristic of the city of São Paulo's urban site being a succession of plateaus cut by infinite valleys. It's as if the city jumped from one hill to another, in the words of Azis Ab'Saber, or as if it were a two-story city – leas and dry levels –, according to Caio Prado Júnior. Segregation and prejudice only were established in the city through actions of violence, exclusion is but one of these actions. In São Paulo, originally and as rule of thumb, exclusion happens by banning “others”- as if this generic third person existed – down the hill towards the still poorly drained leas. It is also noticeable that, in this aspect, São Paulo is an upside down Rio de Janeiro: the population that here is banned down the hill, and there they expel them up the hill; these are two opposite configurations created by the same exclusion logic that produces, in one case or another, two separate cities.

Violence has been the norm, the technique and the symbol through which the city is produced; it is the substance of the fluid that was dammed up in São Paulo.

There is a submerged city in this lake where values and institutions exchange signals: the police kills, school de-educates, transportations leaves you farther away; the powers that legislate, judge and execute are parallel, informal powers. The coexistence of these two separate cities defines conduct criteria that perpetuate in the mechanism of the actions produced by a kidnapped imaginary, so to speak. To identify such mechanism it is necessary to dive into the more than muddy waters of this lake. But not too deep on for very long. Here, staying in the equivalent of the curved line of still waters in Fama correspond to one side or the other imposes a certain blindness produced by the redundant excess of images that, for having shown the same things so many times, no longer require being noticed. We no longer notice, or at least are not shaken up very much by it, the children abandoned on the streets, an armored car, the dozens of people sleeping in winter stalked under the marquis of a completely vacant 20-story building downtown, the closed condos; we no longer are shaken up by the 70+ 1 lives that are sucked in by the aforementioned urban violence every day, which is the daily cost for the existence of the city of São Paulo.

Exclusion is but one of the forms of action of violence, one of the most visible. There are others that are very evident, the type that bleeds or kills directly, and there are more veiled actions that operate in the submerged world. In this last form, notice the production of spaces without symbolic values, and in second half of this same game, the symbolic emptying of the historically consolidated centers; notice the actions disassociated from thought – reality without order and order without reality, in words of Argan – and the management of the city organized in isolated, specialized logics and rationalities that join to build dreadful absurdities.

Let's go back to our place, to the cross section of the Itororó River valley, one can say, a recurrence

of the original geography of the Anhangabaú, of our constructive heritage. Even accepting its present configuration, this Itororó River valley could be extremely wealthy; it connects Ibirapuera park to what could be a park complex disposed on the margin of the Pinheiros River – Jockey Club, Panamby, Cidade Universitária and Villa Lobos Park – through a route described by the continuous arch that forms the extensions of the avenues on the bottom of the valley, 23 de Maio and 9 de Julho. In the center of this arch is the Anhangabaú, potentially a civic square whose axis is connected to many other public parks: Dom Pedro, Luz, Anhembi, which, finally, throughout the margin of the Tietê River, could recompose a little of Tietê ecological park idea. This structure of the city, more linked to idleness than to business, to recall Flávio Motta, is still to be appropriated. The grove stone points in this direction.

This transverse action is typical: on the left margin is Bela Vista, on the right margin, Paraíso, both neighborhoods have coincidental level elevations, and between them is the emptiness dug up by the waters of Itororó River, like an enormous trench. This section shows the subway, which preferred to pass through a tunnel parallel to the trench than passing through it where everything was ready, preferred passing 20 meters below and under the projection of Vergueiro Street and not a parallel one 50 meters from there in the same level, in the center of 23 de Maio Av. There must be more than enough perfect technical justifications for that, but this subway configuration, on that stretch, seems to be more of a fancy, but wish not to flee from the rule that, according to Benevolo, dictates the production of every capitalist city: always spend the maximum to always do the minimum. The subway, even when passing at the level of the lowlands, refuses to accept it as a city, the leas are still seen as if they were submerged, and in a way they actually are, under this fluid of a particular substance we have here. As a rule, the highlands are the institution, the formal city: one can notice that Boa Vista Street, on the historical hill, is the headquarters of banks; parallel to it 50 meters away in situation plan and 20 lower is 25 de Março Street, in the lea, where the illegal street retail is feverishly organized.

The complexity of the city is a fact, but it isn't complex because it accumulates a set of different elements, crystallizes different historical moments, opposite practices in constructions and everything lives in the mess of the urban space and present time. It is a complexity built from accumulations. It isn't complex in the requirements of the actions; on the contrary, it suggests precise and direct actions and sometimes, actions that have been frequently rehearsed. More than that, one can say that the city is trivial, in other words, it presents such demands in the triviality of our day-to-day lives. Additionally, the city is always an ongoing work, therefore it always allows people to clearly see other configuration possibilities. That's why it demands actions and suggests configurations, it's a source and target, subject and object of our actions in its space at the same time.

What I would like to say is that it is possible to see the city a little as if it were the day's newspaper, a place where everything is written and rewritten everyday, look at it this way to oppose the erudition and complexity, a necessary and shallow knowledge as are the trivialities of our quotidian lives, as if to the urgencies of the actions we must perform in the urban space it isn't necessary to know anything but what is printed on the newspaper every day. A city like São Paulo can be considered the complete universe of everything we could do as well as the repertoire of all possibilities we may come to perform one day. Like Borges, in his "History of eternity", when he quotes: "Who has seen the present has seen everything: those things that happened in the unfathomable past, those that will happen in the future". To us, the city is the present we have, it is the world of men living together and, according to Paulo Mendes de Rocha, "the only history that exists is men alive at the same time".

Here, we return to the initial point. Another reason for the stone to be there so well hidden is, let's say, the damming of the fluid violence in the city of São Paulo, a dam that can submerge the totality of history: nature, the constructions and 20 million people, all together. The aforementioned grove stone, which is no longer seen on the slope of 23 de Maio Av., submerged in this dam that may bring power through inverted turbines, as if it were an inside out power station. The concealment didn't happen through anyone's will, neither, as is said, due to a project decision. It's how it had to be; it was regulated in the submerged territory of this lake, in a kidnapped imaginary where the "project" doesn't decide anything at all. I think that what

was dammed up here is a fluid distilled in the dark, a fluid that, backwards, drains by itself when revealed.

I would like to walk down 23 de Maio tomorrow morning and see that construction built so carefully the reinforced-concrete wall prism that was made to preserve a few trees that had been there so many years before, the grove stone. I would like to see exposed again to everyone what was hidden for 20 years by no one's will. Because the revealed grove stone would finish that work with the freshness of a beauty that is worthwhile seeing in all of them: it would conclude the work making it unfinished.

