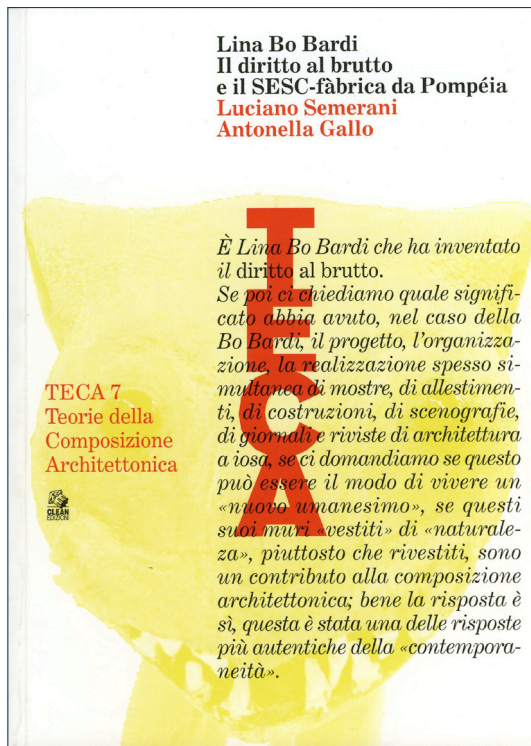


Ugliness: Between Desire and Necessity

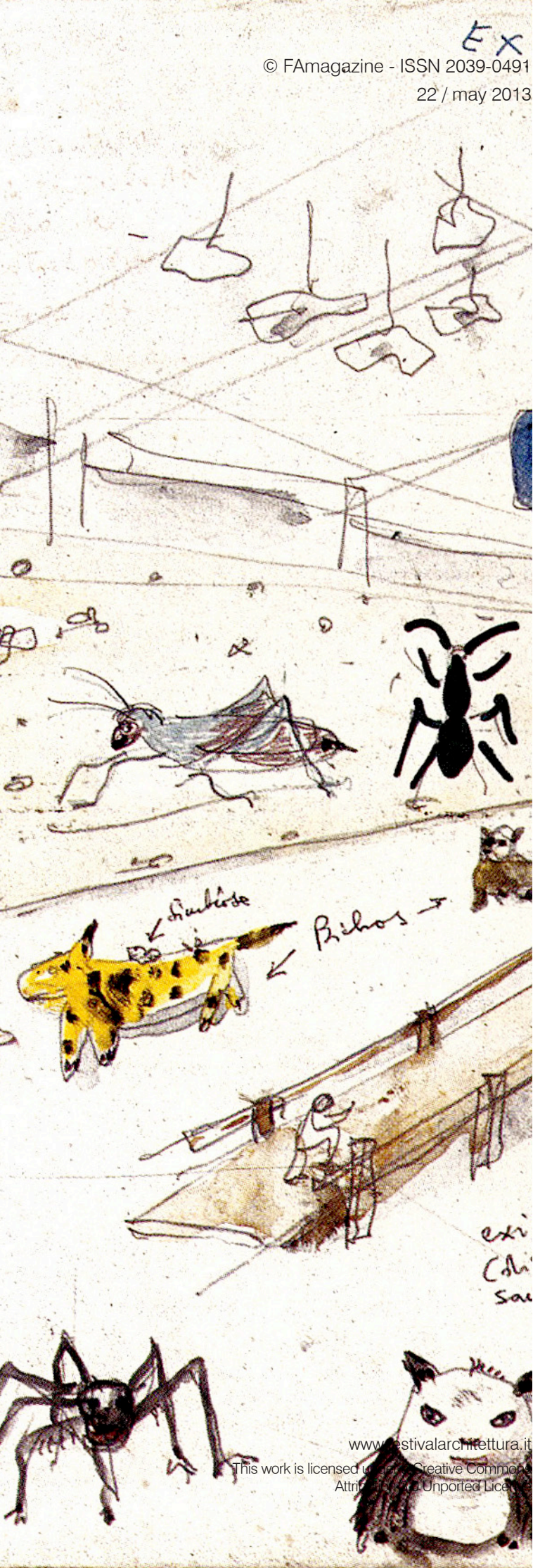
Giuseppina Scavuzzo



Semerani L., Gallo A. (2012) Lina Bo Bardi. Il diritto al brutto e il SESC-fàbrica da Pompéia. Naples: CLEAN, cover

Lina Bo Bardi. Il diritto al brutto e il SESC-fàbrica da Pompéia¹ (*Lina Bo Bardi: the right to ugliness and the SESC Pompéia factory*) is the title of Luciano Semerani and Antonella Gallo's new book about the Italian architect who worked in Brazil as a planner and professor of Architectural Theory, as well as being a cultural promoter. The provocative "right to ugliness" title of Semerani's essay comes from an expression used by Bardi. Its aim is to transmit turmoil, and it works. Reading the two authors' essays, we discover that this turmoil goes in a different direction to the disturbing coined by Freud and subsequently applied to architecture by Antony Vidler to describe the feeling of uninhabitability, of feeling uprooted, in the contemporary condition. By isolating this quote, the "ugliness" with which Semerani has emblematically summarised Lina Bo Bardi's discourse goes in the completely opposite direction: paradoxically, that "ugliness" becomes a hymn to the possibilities of architecture becoming fertile. It is a fertility that depends on being rooted in the most original, ancestral and visceral form that connects man to his birth on earth.

The "right to ugliness" was an expression Bardi initially used to refer to another of her interests: northeast Brazilian folk art. Later her reflection on the civic responsibility to produce objects was transferred to architecture, bringing with it the iconic and figurative power that animates her architecture. Northeast Brazilian production is pre-artisanal (artisanal knowledge



Bardi's is not a personal formal world which strives for originality or draws on a culture or an idea of the world with a corresponding aesthetic that is not the codified one from western culture. It has tools and rules. These are not harmonious canons referring to principles of superior validity, but rules that find superior validity by clinging to the cyclicity of nature, in which everything is a passage from one thing to another, including metamorphosis and reuse. Animals dig lairs or live in those of other animals, transforming them; plants adapt and can grow anywhere; everything is devoured and digested and becomes fertile soil for other forms of life. Bardi believed that western culture should also be devoured and digested to become something else, something fertile to nourish new life: a literal concept of crossbreeding that does not reinterpret or translate, but is fecund and regenerates.

A language that follows these rules cannot be abstract: like the myth and magic it refers to, the sign, or figuration, dominates. Taken from folk imagery, from the Brazilian bestiary that Semerani defines "Heaven on earth without archangels", Bardi wants to restore to us the original condition of the inhabitants of a universe uncorrupted by market needs or theology, an exuberant paradise of animal and vegetable life whose techniques of grafting, camouflage and assembly are passed on to architecture. With a compelling demonstration, Semerani describes composition reaching an ahistorical level. Bardi's considerations on the concept of time – the linear and progressive one invented by the theological and mercantile West, and the mythical, magical one consisting of a maze of lines in which one proceeds in a circular or jumpy fashion – are thus transposed from the ideological level to the diachronicity of architectural composition.

Bardi, quoting Brecht, said that the "right to ugliness" is also an affirmation of freedom, of the "capacity to

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Fifò, oil lamp for wall or table, tin plate and burnt-out lamp bulb, Bahia, 1963

say no” to the impositions of technique and market, because “the freedom of the artist is individual but true freedom can only be collective... a freedom connected to the limitations of science, and not to the technology that has become technocracy”². Bardi believed that modern culture could be created in popular culture with the propulsive power of a new humanism that reverts to using technique not as an aim but as a tool of necessity. Antonella Gallo takes as a paradigm of this research the SESC Pompeia, the history of the work, the constructive practice, the life housed within a kind of architecture in which, she explains, we find the very model of the growth of the metropolis that is devoured and digested until the meaning is subverted.

Emblematic of the relationship with technique is the exposed error that Gallo describes. In various architectural traditions, such as the Jewish one, the error is sought and offered as a sacrifice of pride, a reminder of the imperfection of man and his works. In this case it is not an exercise in humility but authenticity: the effort put into the work confirms this. It is not sought in order to be humbled but to be accepted, it does not invalidate the work but is part of it like the scars on a body that has lived and struggled. The exaltation of technique and market contain an idea of beauty linked to everything that proclaims it is new, lucid, perfect, to the extent that some contemporary architecture seems to tell us, from an alien world of technological perfection, that we are too human, with our imperfect bodies that are prone to ageing. The SESC, as described by Antonella Gallo, knows how to “dispense the pleasure of the body and the psyche’s freedom” through its openings, its primitiveness and its poverty. Composition and civic responsibility are inseparable: the composition’s poetic, timeless language is regenerated by its roots and its signs; its figures become seeds, promising a potential continuation of life.

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We see this awareness re-emerge even in countries in which the destruction of every root has been systematically planned and executed, in which technique, market and a misunderstood sense of modernity are allied to construct macro works that are the negation of any humanism. In China, Wang Shu builds multi-material walls in which materials from demolitions carried out in the name of growth – roof tiles, bricks, pieces of glazed tiles – are assembled according to traditional techniques, taking as a model the manual production of everyday objects. Thus, like a large metonymic figure, his Ceramic House of walls covered in pieces of glazed tiles assumes the form and principle of functionality of the ink stones used in the art of calligraphy that the architect practises on a daily basis.

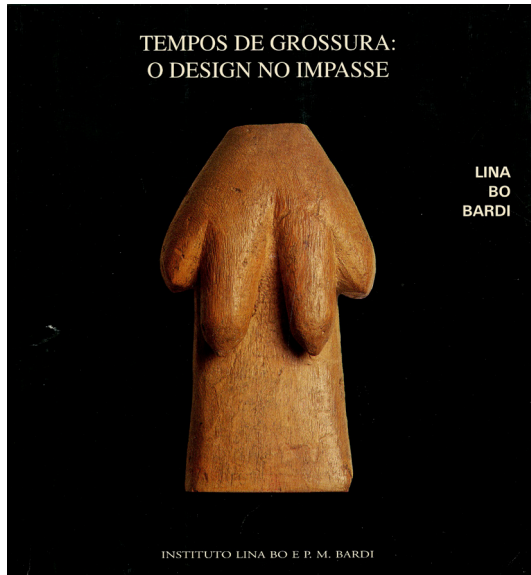


Lina Bo Bardi, "Possible future of the SESC Pompeia", perspective, 1983

Semerani and Gallo's book, which does not follow linear time but an intertwining of timelines, returns to the present in search of more or less positive down-sizing, the "wry and questioning smile of a beautiful and intelligent woman", to quote Semerani. This stops us from being too certain that technical progress can give us what we need, which responds to our needs and fills us with desire. Gallo mentions another even more scandalously provocative feeling: pity, intended as the capacity to recognise and confer dignity to limited means, for architecture the capacity to be offered.

The Brazilian people's ability to celebrate life is never separated from this reading of Bardi's work. In her architecture, through those irregular holes, we glimpse the toothless smile of a baby. Perhaps out of spite we could say it is ugly in its disharmony, but it is as beautiful as a promise of happiness.

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Bo Bardi L. (1994). Tempos de grossura: o design no impasse. San Paolo: Instituto Lina Bo e P. M. Bardi, cover.

¹ Semerani L., Gallo A. (2012) *Lina Bo Bardi. Il diritto al brutto e il SESC-fàbrica da Pompéia. Napoli: CLEAN*

² Bo Bardi L. (1994). *Tempos de grossura: o design no impasse. San Paolo: Instituto Lina Bo e P. M. Bardi.*



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