

Distant landscapes: Finding harmony in the work of Roberto Burle Marx

Susan J. Wake¹ and Cesar Wagner²

^{1,2} Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

{swake¹, cwagner²}@unitec.ac.nz, ORCID-0000-0002-1837-7581¹, ORCID-0000-0001-7212-916X²

Abstract: Roberto Burle Marx was a renowned Brazilian artist, gardener and landscape architect who perhaps came to greatest acclaim through painting with plants using modernist curves and mass planting of varied plant form, colour, and texture. His strong designs read like a 2D landscape tapestry when viewed from above and his fascination with landscapes and Brazilian native plants fuelled his many plant-hunting expeditions. Burle Marx (BM) promoted the use of native flora and was a passionate conservationist who worked with famous Brazilian architects to sculpt 3D gardens composed of careful arrangements of volumes and shapes that surrounded and complemented their modernist buildings. This paper proposes that he was influenced by the anthropophagic movement that emerged in early 1920s São Paulo, which represented consumption or ‘cannibalisation’ of existing cultures, ideas, and beliefs and their subsequent transformation into something that reflected Latin American civilisation and its sense of identity. A rich fusion that is uniquely Brazilian resulted - embracing European, indigenous, and black African heritage. The movement influenced art, music, religion, design, and architecture. We present the case that BM infused his garden-making with an anthropophagic approach which influenced his conservation and use of native Brazilian plants. Further, we argue that this has created more harmonious outcomes and is part of the enduring regard for BM both within Brazil and internationally.

Keywords: Landscape architecture; Brazil; Roberto Burle Marx; Anthropophagic Movement.

1. Introduction

With the theme of this conference being ‘Harmony in Architectural Science and Design’, we are applying the theme to a discussion about the internationally renowned landscape architect, Roberto Burle Marx (BM). BM famously collaborated widely with architects, enveloping their designs in gardens combining lush plants, rocks, water, and abstractions of classic Portuguese mosaics (*azulejos*). He worked tirelessly in creating harmonious landscapes - between architecture and his gardens, within his own designs and between his gardens and their wider landscape context. BM was a prolific Brazilian garden designer and artist of the 20th century with close to three thousand designs (not all constructed) done during his fifty plus years of garden design career. Perhaps most famously this included the promenade at Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro and government ministries in the new capital of Brasília (Silva, 2006). He is well known for uniquely developing his own style of modernism and cubism, which complemented and

blended with the designs of architects of this oeuvre (Montero, 2001) through his use of sweeping curves and mass planting of largely native Brazilian flora. This has been likened to ‘painting with plants’ (Adams, 1991). Through his plant hunting and conservation initiatives, he was committed to ‘sustaining the future’, another focus of this conference. His style and body of work has influenced and inspired garden designers worldwide (Silva, 2006), although it is likely that many are not aware of his considerable efforts and successes both in championing to protect Brazilian ecosystems and to save plant species through plant collecting expeditions. Considering his work and influences through the lenses of harmony and environmental stewardship is also appropriate now, since 2024 marks the thirty-year anniversary of his death in 1994, aged 84. It is therefore relevant to consider how his gardens and legacy are being sustained. This paper will use BM public garden examples to highlight the influences on his work and connect this to the themes of this conference through its aspirations of harmony and future sustainability.

2. Burle Marx – Influences as a plantsman

With upwards of twenty plant species named after him, BM made a significant contribution to plant collecting, although his Brazilian *coletas* (expeditions) did not begin until 1949, the same year he purchased a rundown *Sítio* or ex-farm (Montero, 2001). His early plant interest is widely reported to have come from drawing plants in the Berlin-Dahlem Botanic Garden in the late 1920s when he was studying painting. He is said to have been captivated by the lush tropical plants of Brazil, having only previously experienced colonial garden plants in Brazil or crop plants such as bananas and sugarcane (Eliovson, 1991). His lifelong interest in plants and his passion for using and conserving native plants stems from this seminal experience. However, as a collector, he did not restrict himself to only native plants and avidly sought plant material from nurseries outside Brazil; evidenced by letters he wrote, as presented in Dourado (2022). According to Eliovson (1991) his plant use in design became increasingly ecologically-focused, using autochthonous (indigenous, not colonial) plants to achieve stable communities (phytocenosis). Later he built on this harmony by using non-native or non-local but ecologically-compatible plants, which he called ‘artificial ecological associations’ (Montero, 2001). An example of this is the planting at the Ministry of the Army and Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brasília, where extreme conditions and design requirements made use of local-only plants impossible.

As Montero (2001) explains, using such a wide plant palette meant BM could work with a fluidity that saw him using sculptural plants as standalone focal points or composing shapes that reconstructed distant landscapes, creating perfectly balanced groups of plants that achieved harmony and unity. Although he said, “If a garden is to complement the landscape, it has the landscape as a starting point” (Montero, 2001, p. 47), he clearly understood the difference between garden design and nature, as evidenced by the following quote (Montero, 2001, p. 45):

A garden [...] is organised nature, where the artist aims to bring out the beauty of the colours, the forms, the rhythm, the ordered volumes. It is the establishing of harmony, the creating of contrasts, since the whole is a warp and weft in which every element is indispensable.

Yet, his design reach went beyond so that he sought to create harmony between the natural environment and human life, in a truly *Brasiliense* way (Boifava, 2020), as dwelt on further later in this paper.

BM’s plant collecting expeditions were a method of conservation, identifying and cataloguing plants before they disappeared, both from the wild and from potential use in garden design. Plants were taken to his *Sítio* (also known as *Santo Antônio da Bica*) and acclimatized there, depending on their region of

origin. Later he convinced local farmers near the *Sítio* to produce plants for him since his prolific and plant-rich design work relied heavily on a continuous source of plants (Sítio guide, pers. comm., January 2018).

As Montero (2001) observes, BM understood ‘spirit of place’ due to his deep connection to landscape and “[...] created gardens like a composer, in harmony with the landscape” (pp. 24). Part of this was local plant selection but he was also meticulous about the observation of landscape features (e.g. borrowed views), soil, microclimates, etc. There were, however, occasions where mimicking the surrounding landscape was not the *modus operandi*. An example was in the design of gardens to surround the ministerial buildings in the new capital of Brasília. Here the ecosystem type is *cerrado* or savanna (desert-like with low shrubs growing at 800m altitude) with xerophilous plants growing in vivid red soil, adding to the sensation of baking hot conditions. The vision here was to create a ‘garden city’, in contradiction to the environment. According to urbanist and friend, Lucio Costa, “the city would make the landscape” (Montero, 2001, p. 118). Shade and cooling effects were needed so BM’s response was to turn to water, the element that surrounds and defines Brazil. In the Ministry of the Army square (known as the Triangle Garden) he created a lake with raised planters rising out of it. A local species of palm and other shade trees were liberally planted, as well as linear beds of mass planting and groundcover plants to protect the soil, set in a patterned ground plane of geometric and linear shapes (Figure 1).

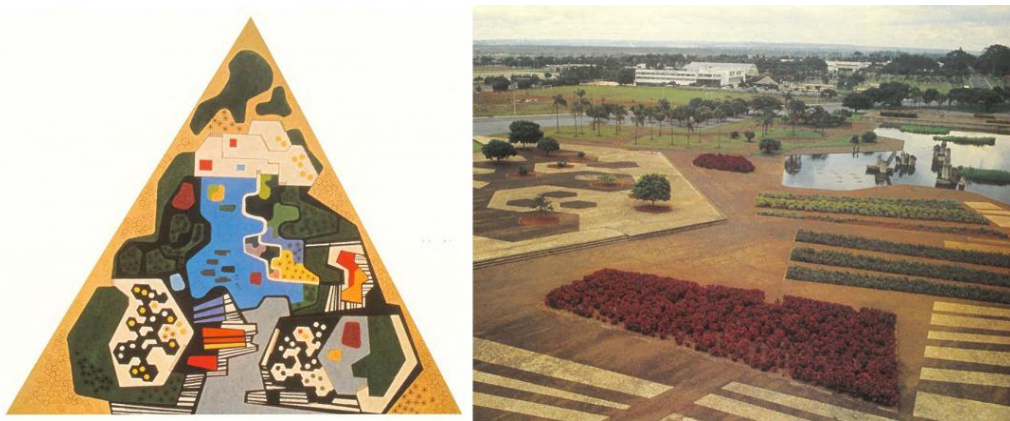


Figure 1: BM design and image of the Ministry of the Army square, Brasília, 1970. (source: Montero, 2001)

However, it was in the garden created around the Ministry of Foreign Affairs building (known as Itamaraty Palace) that he took his water features to another level, wrapping the building within a small lake or tank on all sides and bringing the planting from outside to inside the building. He planted the aquatic garden with water plants and situated dryer-loving plants such as pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana*) on amorphous-shaped planters that were raised out of the water. Inside the ground floor he created a tropical jungle and on a roof terrace he installed a small dry garden that is a miniature negative of the shapes in the aquatic garden, creating a harmony of spaces and volumes (Figure 2). To create a harmonious outcome with the plants he selected, some of which were not local, BM took pains to produce the right conditions for them to thrive. An example of his attention to ecological detail is as follows (from a different project): “He also transplanted to Araxá, 800 square metres of iron oxide rocks from Minas, so that the plants he wanted growing next to the water of the spa baths could have the soil they love.” (Vincent, 1949, quoted in Dourado 2022, p. 323).



Figure 2: The aquatic garden of the Itamaraty Palace, Brasília, 1965. (source: Cavalcante *et al.*, 2011)

Dourado (2022) points out that little has been studied about BM's relentless role as an environmental critic and environmental defender. He wrote and spoke out regularly, challenging what he regarded as poor policy and decision-making, including during military dictatorship years when to do so was life-threatening. He was on the Federal Council of Culture from 1967-1974 and his frustration at being ignored is clear in what he wrote when he resigned:

I have undertaken dozens of excursions to observe native Brazilian species and from almost all of them, I have returned horrified by the mass destruction, with the extinction of species and the disfigurement of the landscape [...]. I do not fear being reviled by the predators I denounce [...]. My commitment was never to be silenced in the face of errors. My duty as I understand it, is to fight for what's right. [...]. [...] I refer to the amount of my extensive and protracted personal observation, in botany and ecology, when I quote the reason for the necessity of a conservationist approach to nature (p. 316).

In 1976, in a letter to Wolfgang Sauer, president of Volkswagen in Brazil, over Volkswagen's culpability for huge burn-offs of Amazonia native forests to establish cattle ranches, BM was clearly incensed (Dourada, 2022, p. 317):

You then say that the fire used on the occasion only affected bushes, weeds and other types of bush, never trees. I am not a believer in domesticated fire. As well as "weeds", it must have also burnt "noisy" macaws, "dirty" armadillos, "fierce" jaguars, "venomous" snakes, and, doubtless large trees and even perhaps, a treacherous "Indian."

In summary, the extent of BM's tireless efforts to fight for the survival of Brazilian nature, especially the Atlantic rainforest, and to conserve as much as he had time and energy for is truly impressive. He then used the conserved plants in his designs, thus bringing greater awareness and enjoyment of Brazilian plants to Brazilians. This is significant evidence of the harmony he sought and succeeded in achieving throughout his career.

3. Burle Marx - Influences as a designer

There were many likely influences on BM's design work. Lucio Costa, friend, teacher, and collaborator named one as music (BM was exposed to classical music from an early age and studied singing in Germany), saying "Roberto Burle Marx is a musician whose accents are perceived through another sense: light." (in Montero, 2001, p. 1). The early 20th Century was a very fertile time for Brazilian culture with Portuguese and other European influences being increasingly questioned by the rise of radical groups, including architects. At the same time, there was a tenacious adherence to 'old ways' by many educated Brazilians. This included plant choices for gardens where European-preferred roses and flowering annuals held sway and exuberant tropical or *cerrado* (dry plains) origin plants were regarded variously with fear (of their spiky nature or their lush fecundity), indifference or not at all (Montero, 2001).

According to White (2017) the publication and sensational success of the book called '*Os Sertões*' (The Backlands) by Euclides da Cunha in 1902 about the destruction and massacre of a peaceful Brazilian village-colony by authorities, claiming the villagers were dissidents, saw the beginning of Brazilians' quest for *Brasildade* (Brazilian-ness). The cruel injustice that was portrayed outraged a generation of Brazilians - among them BM (Boifava, 2020). Following on, the '*Semana de Arte Moderna*' in São Paulo, in 1922, to celebrate one hundred years of independence from Portugal, then became the setting for a 'thought movement' based on acknowledging a Brazilian context and sense of self that replaced the previous view that the worthiest influences came from Europe (Pendse, 2007). Pendse (2007) argues this "[...] reflected itself as a modernist esthetic expression in the art, literature, and architecture of the period." (para. 1). The experimentation that followed included the publishing of various periodicals such as a poetry manifesto called '*Pau-Brasil*' (named after an Atlantic rainforest tree) by Oswald de Andrade in 1924. This urged Brazilians to overcome their fear of things that originated beyond the Portuguese-dominated urban realm, such as indigenous people, jungles, African slave descendants, and poisonous animals – and instead claim it all as uniquely Brazilian (Fraser, 2000). Fraser (p.184) calls it the:

"Reclaim the Jungle movement", an attempt to reclaim for Brazilians an idea traditionally associated with danger and to make it accessible to the urban intellectual imagination.

The architectural modernist movement was very strong in Brazil with a number of key architects embracing and championing it. Through an earlier association with Lucio Costa, BM quickly became involved, first doing a private garden and then the garden for the Ministry of Education and Health in Rio de Janeiro in 1938 (known as the MES building). The MES design is in three parts, street level, a roof garden on the main building, and a further roof garden on the exhibition wing. This latter is perhaps one of BM's most famous and recognisable designs - memorable for its early use of modernist ideas including amoebic shapes (planted beds) surrounded by sinuous meandering paths (Figure 3).

Fraser (2000) makes the claim that the design may be a barbed acknowledgment towards the Franco-Swiss Master, Le Corbusier (LC), who consulted on the MES project. Fraser suggests that BM's design of the MES roof garden took satirical reference from LC's journal entry following his plane ride over Brazilian braided (meandering) rivers. In his book, later published, LC implied 'meandering' represents old and confused thinking while straight lines represent clear and new thinking. At this time Brazilians were continuing with their cultural separation from Europe, including embracing their 'barbarism', while Europeans continued to look down on Brazil as a country full of dangers and fears (e.g. plants, animals, people, and untamed wilderness).



Figure 3: BM design for the Minister's roof garden on the exhibition wing, Rio de Janeiro, 1938.
(source: Hoffmann and Nahson, 2016)

The emerging concept of Brazil's emancipation from Europe became known as '*Antropofagia*', which is described by Pendse (2007) as representing:

[...] the process of Brazilian identity construction through metaphoric cannibalisation within a rapidly transforming and essentially urbanising industrialized economy (para. 2).

To cannibalise something is to take the best or most useful from it and reject what is not. In the Brazilian situation, it was seen as producing radical outcomes through metaphorically eating all the influences, digesting them, and regurgitating something new and *avant-garde*. For example, European Brazilians consuming indigenous and black African culture and their beliefs, and simultaneously also consuming any perceived useful aspects from European and North American culture, freely creating their own art out of this anthropophagic process. If BM was a believer in *Antropofagia*, as Fraser (2000) proposes, it is possible that this influence could have led to him cannibalising LC's writing and regurgitating a design celebrating meandering and rejecting LC's proposal that clean straight lines indicated clear and new thinking. Further, to drive home the point BM used lush tropical plants in the design, seen as dangerous by Europeans. In making a design feature of curves, meanders and lush foliage (which became BM trademarks) BM may well have been putting his own anthropofagic stamp on his oeuvre.

BM is credited with transforming architecture through his garden designs due to his own need to express himself (Montero, 2001). In Dourado's (2022) book of BM's letters, Saarinen, a NY journalist and well-known art and architecture critic, who became a friend of BM, claimed that BM himself was an architect due to the way he used plants in his designs. In a review of a BM exhibition in Washington DC in 1954, she commended BM on how his designs relate to the architecture and the surrounding landscape in supporting, reciprocal and reinforcing ways (Dourado, 2022, p. 330). BM was more coy about taking this much credit, simply saying: "It is important that architects are my friends. We work together. I must understand what the meaning, the idea of the architecture is" (quoted in NY Times review by Saarinen, 1954, reprinted in Dourado, 2022, p. 331). However, he clearly felt that his solutions for the Itamaraty Palace (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) in Brasília were successful in connecting with the architecture of the building when he wrote to his protégé Conrad Hamerman in 1967 (Dourado, 2022, pp. 318-319):

Yesterday I came back from Brasília, where I finished the Foreign Ministry garden (Itamaraty). This garden is enormously important to my career. It's an aquatic garden in

which there are a large number of plants from the region. My solution to the aquatic garden is new [...]. The pieces distributed in the lake, or tank, that surrounds the Foreign Ministry are linked to the rhythm of the arches that characterize the building. [...]. The internal garden is connected to the external one. I covered tubes with tree ferns and planted philodendrons, anthurions and other epiphyte plants. The effect is truly first class and Oscar Niemeyer liked it a lot [...]. The result is that many people without a well-defined opinion and who came up with a series of complaints now think it all extraordinary.

In summary it appears that BM was influenced in his design work by the blossoming of Brazilian identity in the early 20th Century and his talent as an artist then led to him being receptive to experimenting with movements such as modernism and cubism. BM's garden designs were well known for looking like abstract paintings so with his passion for plants, Brazilian landscapes and conservation of the beautiful flora and fauna of his beloved Brazil, the scene was set for creating stunning gardenesque architectural monuments. It has been claimed that he helped give to architects' work "[...] greater coherence and unity" (Saarinen, 1954, in Dourado, 2022, p. 331), creating harmony between the parts and within the landscape, whether it was surrounding a country estate or a government building.

4. Burle Marx – Sustaining the future

As Stuart Wade, Director of Architecture and Design at MOMA points out in the Forward of Adams' (1991) catalogue for the New York Museum of Modern Art's exhibition of BM projects, BM's significant conservation efforts predate most others by at least 30 years. Significantly, he developed a modern landscape aesthetic that combined artistic and ecological imperatives. This was due to his artistic talent and his indomitable passion for the flora and landscapes of Brazil - to preserve, collect and group plants within designs in ways that mimicked nature, even when they were positioned within structures and shapes not found in nature. On a conservation front, especially considering the more than fifty plant species that carry his name, there is clear evidence that BM was 'sustaining the future'.

On a garden design level, BM has influenced generations of designers in Brazil and internationally - both during and beyond his lifetime. His work and style are still popular and much copied, as well as changing and evolving in the hands of others (Silva, 2006). His design legacy is the 3000 projects he worked on for over half a century of great change, influence and development within Brazil. It is also the huge variety of native Brazilian plant material that he collected and used in his projects - which are now known world-wide. Aroids such as *Philodendron* species, *Alocasia* species and *Anthurium* species plus colourful bromeliads, *Iresine* and *Alternanthera* species were among his favourites, and his collection of *Philodendron* species housed at the *Sítio* numbers in the hundreds.

Gardens are, however, ephemeral and in constant state of change as desired plants grow and non-desired plants invade. This is especially the case with mass planting, strong ground-plane patterns and aquatic gardens, which were all signature moves of BM. Adams (1991, p. 7) asserts that "[...] a large number [of gardens] have disappeared or been poorly maintained, a hazard in gardening, where crucial lines, colors, and textures are dependent on keeping nature under control." Saarinen (1954, quoted in Dourado, 2022, p. 331) comments on the fragility of gardens, despite the "[...] comparatively cheap labor for maintenance [in Brazil]." However, his friend and longtime English-based reviewer, Claude Vincent (1949, quoted in Dourado, 2022, p. 322) stated that BM claimed that most of these 'gardeners' were Portuguese immigrants "[...] that not only need 'green fingers', but also real knowledge."

One author of this paper noted, on a recent Brazilian trip, that many BM public gardens were struggling due to lack of maintenance. This varied from lack of plants (e.g. surrounding Oscar Niemeyer's Church of St Francis of Assisi, Pampulha, Belo Horizonte), to very overgrown plants (e.g. Oscar Niemeyer's Casino, Pampulha) invading weeds (e.g. grass tapestry, Parque Burle Marx, São Paulo), fish overpopulation in ponds leading to high levels of nitrates and anaerobic conditions (e.g. Triangle Garden at the Ministry of the Army square, Brasília), and through to complete dereliction (e.g. Praça Ministro Salgado Filho at Recife airport) with most planting lost or dying and homeless people washing in fetid pond water. In all of these cases there is clearly strong pride (e.g. signs to proclaim it to be a historical monument created by BM) and sometimes evidence of a plan (e.g. Casino garden and Praça Ministro Salgado Filho) to restore, but ensuring this happens in Brazil's shifting political and economic climate is a challenge.

In summary, through his prodigious work ethic and passion for Brazil's plants and landscapes BM was a leading conservation light in Brazil and his legacy of domesticated plants and innovative design have enduring future focus. His gardens, however, are vulnerable to disappearance through neglect.

5. Final considerations

BM has left a giant legacy of design and environmental conservation influences, beauty, and growth of pride among Brazilians for being Brazilian, through celebrating the landscapes and plants of this nation. He did this by finding inspiration in the wild and taking those plants back to use in gardens in a harmonious way with other elements i.e. with the architecture and the wider landscape. Vincent (1949, quoted in Dourado, 2022, p. 324) proposed that BM skipped over the European and North America preoccupation with flower shows and garden clubs and instead created "[...] a garden that can be a living companion to the modern buildings that have already made it famous. In this way, the garden regains its place in the life of modern man." There can be no greater harmony than that and the 'common man' influences that enabled it would seem to be rooted in BM's socialist beliefs and anthropophagic-based cannibalistic consumption of all the elements needed to design *Brasilidade* (with Brazilianness).

References

- Adams, W.H. (1991) Roberto Burle Marx: *The unnatural art of the garden*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- Boifava, B. (2020) Roberto Burle Marx's cidade parque. *Journal of Landscape Architecture*, 15(3), 74-89. DOI: 10.1080/18626033.2020.1886518
- Cavalcante, L., El-Dahdah, F. and Rambert, F. (eds.) (2011) *Roberto Burle Marx: The modernity of landscape*, Cite de l'architecture & du patrimoine/ Institut français d'architecture, Paris.
- Dourado, G.M. (2022) *Folhas em movimento: Cartas de Burle Marx*. Luste, São Paulo.
- Eliovson, S. (1991) *The gardens of Roberto Burle Marx*. Timber Press, USA.
- Fraser, V. (2000) Cannibalizing Le Corbusier: The MES gardens of Roberto Burle Marx. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*. 59(2), 180-193.
- Hoffman J., Nahson, C.J. (2016) *Roberto Burle Marx: Brazilian modernist*, Yale University Press, New Haven.
- Montero, M.I. (2001) *Roberto Burle Marx: The lyrical landscape*, University of California, Berkeley.
- Pendse, L.R. (2024) "Anthropofagia incorporated": A concept or a movement. *LL Journal*, 19(1). Available from: <https://lljournal.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2007-2-pendse-texto/> (accessed 18 July 2024)
- Silva, R. (2006) *New Brazilian gardens: The legacy of Burle Marx*. Thames and Hudson, London.
- White, E. (2017) *What insanity is this, Dr Euclides?* Available from: <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/08/04/what-insanity-is-this-dr-euclides/> (accessed 20 July 2024)