



Oscar Niemeyer at the door of his atelier in Copacabana. 2002

Dr. Niemeyer

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English Version

By Luis Berríos-Negrón

Transcript by Mariana Hardy

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On December 2001, there I sat in the new terminal 4 @ JFK about to board a plane heading to Brazil. The stress of the current travel conditions is gracefully ameliorated by the enormously light Alexander Calder mobile; grounding me, reminding me the reason of this flight: Oscar Niemeyer. I focus on Calder's mobile and feel the zero gravity, a timeless scale. Feelings Niemeyer has also given me upon navigating his oeuvre; a malleable license to dream he awarded us decades ago. And then it hits me, what I'm to ask, to say to Niemeyer? How can I, a wet-behind-the-ears student-architect, connect with this 94 year old living legend, commie, partner of Le Corbusier and contemporary of greats such as Lloyd Wright, Gropius, Tange, Van der Rohe, Sartre? There are light years of information in between us. How shall we wormhole the sense out of this one? Oscar Niemeyer is Brazilian, "carioca" to be exact (from the state of Rio de Janeiro). He was born with modernism. At 33 he built his first mayor commission, several leisure buildings around the Pampulha Lake in Belo Horizonte, where his St. Francis of Assisi chapel is located. At 40 he submits a

design competing against the best architects in the world, Le Corbusier being one of the competitors, for the see of the United Nations in New York City. Reluctantly, due to conflicts with Corbu, he is awarded with the commission and is built in 1953. From 1955 through 1960, he, alongside his mentor/urbanist Lucio Costa, designs and builds the new capital city of Brazil, Brasilia. During the 60's and 70's Niemeyer is harassed and persecuted by the insurrect military regiment. The chief engineer of Brasilia and good friend of Niemeyer, Joaquim Cardozo, is judged and prosecuted for "incompetence" for his role in the building of the new capital. Niemeyer is forced to seek political asylum in Europe for almost 2 decades. During those years and still to this day he continues to build in 5 continents with dozens of transcendental works credited to his oeuvre. He is criticized by many alleging that Brasilia did not work. Niemeyer wrote – *"I hope that Brasilia becomes a city of happy people, people that feel life in all its plenitude, in all its frailty; people who understand the value of the simple things – a gesture, an expression of affection and solidarity."* Perhaps Niemeyer depended on humanity...

Surrounded by the intoxicating spirit of Rio and with my vague Spanish version of Portuguese, I am welcomed with warmth and contagious sympathy by Mr. Niemeyer (or Dr. Oscar as he is referred to around these parts).

Oscar Niemeyer: *Where did you spend the New Year?*

Luis Berríos-Negrón: I spent it in Bahía (eastern coast of Brazil).

ON: *Ah, yes, the land of happiness.*

LB: Wonderful the people in Bahía, yes?

ON: *It reminds me of the west coast of Africa.*

LB: So, you're meeting this week with Le Monde (newspaper of largest circulation in France), for the publishing of a brief biography. Why do you think you are, at 94, as requested as ever?

ON: *I do not know the reason (smiles). I am a common man just as everyone else.*

LB: As described in my letter to you, I feel there's a great desire to hear your opinions during this period of drastic change and conflict. 9.11 has instigated a vast reassessment of perceptions, from local to global standpoints. And for many of us who were meters away from the collapse, we have been left with a profound feeling of despondence. For us specifically, as new students of the profession, we are beginning to wonder what is to become of the world, little less of the profession... its seeming irrelevance due to inexplicit geopolitics causing the radical dismay of our fellows across the globe. Considering this, do you envision a new role for architecture... for the student, for the professional, for the people?

ON: *I have always told students that school is not enough to be a professional. I always say that one needs to be aware of the world and of life so to be able to participate with dignity in the events of actuality. When I designed the University*

of Algiers in Africa I proposed a program for the school of architecture that, in addition to the traditional curriculum, implemented parallel courses in science, philosophy, sociology, literature and politics. All so that the student can leave the academia to live in decency, able to manifest. That is my opinion. I go through life tied to my drawing table, but I find that life is much more important than architecture.

LB: Do you feel that the skyscraper still has a place in these times of neoliberal sprawl?

ON: *I believe that urbanism has options. It can be vertical, it can be horizontal. Any solution can be good. I believe that the architect must be sensitive, procuring the needs of the community. Urbanism must be a solution that provides for the well being of humanity. I understand that architecture changed many things. For me, after reinforced concrete, I have not had any interest in other architectures. In the past, in Rome for example, they made a dome of 35m in diameter and one meter of thickness. Yesterday, we released a design for a dome of 70m in diameter with a 20cm thickness. So, the technique has evolved. Reinforced concrete is what prevails. The space that the architect designs must procure the function of society. Therefore, the architecture makes the architect make the architecture. I do not credit an architecture that serves all. It would be repetition, it would be monotony. I believe architects, within reason, must procure their own architecture. I believe in intuition. I do my work. I procure a lighter architecture.*

LB: Do you have any suggestions as to what should be done with the site where the World Trade Center used to be?

ON: *No, I do not. I understand there will be an exhibition in New York (Max Protech Gallery) about these proposals. I was asked to participate but I respectfully declined to submit my ideas. I feel that we are entering one of the darkest periods in human history, a period of violence. Many see that what happened to the Towers was an act of terrorism, but I believe that the invasions and the bombardments are also acts of terrorism I find it horrible. The death and the horror caused by the collapse of the Towers were horrible, but the destruction of entire cities in the Arab world is also horrible. Many innocent people are dying. I believe that life is a minute (smiles). I believe we should live it better. We must live well. Why that misery, that hatred? I traveled the Arab world and it is an antiquated world. I was in Saudi Arabia and it is outside of civilization. I was in the United States and I liked it. During those years students were jumping on the streets saying - "up democracy, down fascism..." It was a time of enthusiasm trying to make a better world. But that's in the past, now it is all confused. I don't like Bin Laden, but I don't like Bush either.*

LB: Looking at Brasilia after half a century, and considering "the urban proliferation of confusion"(1) abetted by the Alphavilles (prototypical gated communities for the elite of Brazil, ironic considering Goddard), can architecture and urbanism still facilitate social mobility?

ON: *I find that it is man who damages things. Look at Argentina. It is a moment of enthusiasm where the people come out to the streets. In Brazil, things are not well either. They have sold our country. It is very complex, don't you think? I am not a political analyst, I am just a simple architect, but I am interested and I have my opinion. I lived my life protesting for a better, common life, for a more just world.*

LB: I read a recent article about you in Wall Paper magazine where you described La Casa do Baile in Pampulha, as you would describe many if not all of your public gestures, as a place for the people. Is the Sambadrome a satisfying project from a socio-political point of view?

ON: *Carnaval is an event of the people. The people are those who are poor and live in the favela (illegal housing). When Carnaval comes, those who live in the favelas innocently spend the bit of money they saved during the year on their costumes to go and entertain those who have oppressed them all throughout the year. There goes the bourgeoisie to applaud, only to return the next day to the same oppression and rejection of the poor. The world is very perverse.*

LB: And the United Nations?

ON: *Like I said, man damages everything.*

LB: Which project has given you the most satisfaction?

ON: *I have made such diverse projects... if you look at my work, I have made few apartment and office buildings. I have made more theaters, museums... projects that require more imagination. Those are the commissions I enjoy. I like making residences but it is always a pain in the ass dealing with proprietors (smiles). I made a house in Brasilia. The house was good. When the house was ready, the owner called me to go see it. I did. When I arrived, the wife of the owner was waiting for me on the entrance, a nice lady. She says to me – “Dr. Niemeyer, this house has changed our lives. We liked it so much I arranged it myself.” I was frozen (laughs). When I went in, the house had no architecture left. So, architecture is not only the outside, it is also the inside, the program. That is something that it is difficult for people to understand. The design is the space that envelops the architecture. Now, I will tell you that I do what I enjoy. When the theme allows it I speculate a technique, I convene my engineers. I made a building in Brasilia. It is a government building, it is large. When one arrives under it one only sees one structural member, seemingly floating in the air. This member rises and all the floors are held to two beams that come down. This is a demonstration of technique. I try in helping architecture evolve. The President passes by and says – “why such a luxurious building?” He does not comprehend. When I make a public building as such, I imagine the poor person that will never get anything out of it. That although it is the others that will benefit, that will make money from it, it is this poor person that can at least look at it and say with pleasure – “this is different.” Therefore, architecture is full of secrets. The people want to see the architectural spectacle.*

LB: You are probably tired of listening to people ask you about this quote by Le Corbusier - "Oscar, you do baroque in reinforced concrete, but you do it very well."

ON: *The only influence I had from Le Corbusier was when he told me "Oscar, architecture is invention." Therefore I procure the making of an architecture that has something different, which creates surprise. But my architecture is very different from his. He made this heavy thing. He did not speculate much on the technique. When one arrives into his work there is a lot of columns. He used columns at less than a half the distance of what was needed, you know, like the Egyptians (smirks). Thus I do not criticize him, everybody does what they please.*

LB: Which have been your most important interventions, politically or otherwise, as to protest a social/government action? Have you ever intervened in the misuse of one of your oeuvres?

ON: *I joined the party. I was prohibited from visiting the United States for 20 years. I continued with my ideas. Communism is an idea that continues in the air. It exists for the fellowship of humanity. What happened in the Soviet Union will one day be modified. What the Soviets wanted was government support for housing, food, health, science. I find that capitalism is in decadence. The United States is in a path of crisis. It took 300 years for the Roman Empire to crumble. They can be many years in that climate of power and of excessive intervention in the lives of others. But that will end. I believe that man should look to the sky and realize he is a little thing, of little importance. People are living on appearances... what appearances? A journalist once asked me - "Doctor, after you die people will see your work and then they will be marveled." Marveled about what (laughs)?! People die too, you know. We all die. Everything ends.*

LB: Considering that Gianni Vattimo expresses "the death of art" in his book "The end of Modernity," what do you mean when you say - "the architect should be born an architect just as a painter should be born a painter?"

ON: *I believe that there should be intuition in the arts. The subject learns architecture. The subject goes to school. If the subject has talent, a different architecture might emerge. If not, the subject can be useful in making normal architecture, indispensable for life. Like a child, one must protect intuition. An 8 year old can make a fantastic design. The subject goes to school, meets the teachers, learns the rules. I would like for schools of architecture to allow for more freedom. I know many designers that are better architects than architects. Le Corbusier did not go to school. He had an idea of architecture. He worked in an architect's studio and from there he went on to design the things that he liked. That is why I believe there should be intuition. If there is no intuition, there is mediocrity. Architects are making things that are uniform. If you go to Brasilia today it is very sad. You see work on the streets that are methodical, mediocre, confusing. But what can I do? If you look here in Rio de Janeiro and you ask what is being done, you will be taken to Barra (beach front area southwest of Rio). Barra is shit. It is another Miami. It is a suburb of Miami. In any modern*

city, to see good architecture, you have to have an address on hand, because there is no unity. But that's how it is.

LB: How does it feel to be referred as to the other communist left in the world... the other of course being Fidel?

ON: *Ah... Fidel Castro is a fantastic figure. There he is, alongside the United States, defying American power. Fidel transformed the life of humanity, relating himself to others in a wonderful country. There is no misery, there is fraternity, they have an extraordinary public health system, there is no illiteracy. It is a great example for all humankind.*

LB: What is to become of solidarity and communism?

ON: *I believe that what happened in the Soviet Union was an unforeseen accident. It will evolve, because communism is something that is in the air, which will soon have another name. The idea is that we should live as equals, that we live well. Who can go against that? Only the insane (laughs).*

LB: For an atheist you have quite a gift for conditioning spirituality. How do you connect with these sensibilities in your ecclesiastic oeuvres?

ON: *I was from a catholic family. My family was of landowners. My father came to Rio and got involved in politics. Our house was big and they held gatherings. My mother would open the 6 windows in our living room, would open the "oratorio" (enclosed altar) and there they would hold mass. But when I left on to life I realized that life is very unjust. Therefore, it is important to protest. I go through life protesting that that is unjust.*

LB: What is the project you are currently working on... that you are most enthusiastic about?

ON: *in addition to the projects I have already mentioned to you, I am currently making a house in Norway; I have great interest in this house. I am also making a building in Italy. Here in Rio, I am making "El Camino Niemeyer" in Niteroi that will be a complex of buildings that include a cathedral. That complex will be alongside the coast near the ocean. It is a site that interests me because it will enhance the architecture. I need to closely analyze the conditions as I feel that the buildings must coincide, that there needs to be a malleable element that ligates them. But, the auditorium in Sao Paulo and the museum in Paraná are taking up most of my time.*

LB: Is there intent to project socio-political ideas through the "plastic freedoms" and "gestural aesthetics" of your work?

ON: *My oeuvre is: the work that I make that comes to my hands, it is to convene my fellow artists to work, it is an attempt to return to the integrity of the arts, it is an attempt to return to the ligation between art and architecture. That project that I am making in Niteroi is not going to be done with expensive materials. I do not make my architecture propaganda of materials. My wall is smooth of white. Whenever possible I add a painting or a drawing.*

LB: American critic Hal Foster states – “his [Gehry’s] free expression implies our unfree inhibition, which is also to say that his freedom is mostly a franchise in which he represents freedom more than he enacts it. Today, this exceptional license is extended to Gehry as much as to any artist, and certainly with greater consequences. In another sense this vision of expression and freedom is oppressive because Gehry does indeed design out of “the cultural logic” of advanced capitalism, in terms of its language of risk-taking and spectacle effects.”

- At a time where capitalism and communism seem to be reaching points of saturation and transgression, could you give us a few more words that might help us adapt to these changes?

ON: I do the architecture that I like. I don’t criticize anyone, everyone do as they please. I don’t read anything about my work. There are a lot of books published about my work but the only thing I want is to do the work I like. If you ask me about an architect I will say the work is good. I will never tell you which architect is better, which one is worst. I visited Frank Lloyd Wright at one of his houses, a beautiful house that he liked. The principal element is that the architect is satisfied with the work. When the architect becomes preoccupied with what is being said about the work then the architecture is no good. I always feel that it should be more spontaneous. The best work is that which makes you feel well. Then it can be good.

LB: Doctor, one last question: your dear friend Gabriel García Márquez titles one of his books “Del amor y otros demonios” (*Of love and other demons*). If women are “your drug”, what is your religion?

ON: The woman is important... it is most important... much more important than architecture (smiles). I believe that life is that, to laugh and cry, all the time.

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