the craft of architect oscar ribeiro de almeida niemeyer soares filho

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Oscar Niemeyer – one of the most influential architects of the twentieth century, has died unexpectedly at the age of one hundred and four. Very few buildings designed in the world are untouched by his influence in one way or another. This of course stems from the scope of his works, changing fashions and the inexhaustible creativity of one of the only architects in the world who managed to plan a capital city with its most prominent public buildings. His sources of inspiration were Le Corbusier with whom he worked after graduating, and Lucio Costa – a pioneer in modernist architecture in Brazil who was Niemeyer's partner in the design of the city of Brasilia

Architects usually begin their career within a certain style, develop for a few years, and then either manage to adapt to the upheavals of time... or not. Most architects - even the best of them - trudge along for a few more years before fading out; others, reluctant to be flexible, or simply unable to cope with technological innovations (such as new software), find themselves out of the game and left without a livelihood. Only a few manage to formulate a critical viewpoint that contributes to the creating of a new style.

How did the veteran Brazilian architect manage to shape a distinctive style and maintain it for eighty creative years, when the technological, social, political and architectural milieu around him was in a constant state of change?

The hundreds of interviews Niemeyer gave during his life appear in architectural journals and websites throughout the world, quoting his reputedly romantic statement: "I am not attracted to straight angles or to the straight line, hard and inflexible, created by man. I am attracted to free-flowing sensual curves. The curves that I find in the mountains of my country, in the sinuousness of its rivers, the waves of the ocean, and the body of a beloved

The professional resume of Oscar Niemeyer, who stubbornly continued to participate (and win) architectural competitions almost until his death, could easily decorate several tens of architectural firms

However, his first notable work - the Church of Saint Francis of Assisi in Pampulha, Brazil - was everything but modernist in style. His participation as a Brazilian representative in the design of the UN building in New York, alongside Le Corbusier, created in him a kind of split personality that he resolved with an interesting combination of his romantic nature and his obligation to modernist ideology.

A careful review of Niemeyer's creative work during the last eighty years easily identifies an interesting combination of a functional block structure - usually rectangular and only occasionally circular - surrounded by or attached to a formal construction, that gives the otherwise severe look of the structure an attractive appearance over and above fashion. Prominent in his work from the fifties and sixties, this unique style exists in his later work yet more subtly - which took an interesting turn in the post- modern period, releasing him (like everyone else) from the imposed commitment to the straight line.

During this period, Niemeyer ostensibly abandoned the modernist rigidity, but not its ideological principles. The curved line he started off with became dominant again, but

this time as a means of expressing his climate awareness that found expression in shading and ventilation devices.

These formal projects allowed Niemeyer (and all who followed in his footsteps) to remain front stage - most notably the Oscar Mayer Museum of Japanese Art; the Ibirapuera auditorium; and the Latin America memorial site, where (by the way) there is an improved version of "The Hand" by Le Corbusier from Chandhigarh.

Projects that Niemeyer promoted during his six month stay in Israel in 1964, were supported by the owner of the Dan Hotels - Yekutiel Federman (whose personal home he designed), and Housing Minister at the time, Yosef Almogi, who did not really trust the creative ability of Israeli architects and entrusted Niemeyer with the design of the "City of the Negev".

Niemeyer's works aroused controversy in Israel, primarily because he pointedly ignored the low skyline that characterized Israel of the sixties. This is particularly noticeable at Haifa University where the upside down pyramid he designed - supposed to give the boring campus a unique flair - was never built for budgetary reasons. Likewise the central towers (not built) in Kikar Hamedina, and the Nordia project that was never built but which legitimized the building of Dizengoff Center's high towers. However, the presence of Niemeyer in Israel