The *Promenade Architecturale:* Ideology and Form in Le Corbusier and Niemeyer

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The *promenade architecturale* is a recurrent theme in Le Corbusier's built work and book *Vers Une Architecture*. He leads the visitor through his building along a carefully defined axis. Le Corbusier brought his ideologies via his book to Brazil in the 1930's, where modernism was taken as a way to make the area seem more cultured and sophisticated. Oscar Niemeyer used Le Corbusier's five points of architecture: the free plan, the free façade, the ribbon window, the *pilotis*, and the roof garden in his designs for Brazil. He also used the *promenade architecturale*, an element seen more prominently in Le Corbusier's Villa La Roche. Through the Brazilian Pavilion at the 1939 New York World's fair and more saliently in his Casino for Pampulha in 1942, Niemeyer perfected Le Corbusier's promenade to create and reinforce his undulating form, a completely new interpretation of modernism.

Le Corbusier believed that architecture is appreciated by walking. His *promenade architecturale* guides the visitor through his architecture. Ayers writes that the building's intent is gradually revealed over time, rather than at a single entrance[1]. The building is a series of revelations and concealments, allowing the visitor to experience the space based on Le Corbusier's objective. In *Vers Une Architecture,* Le Corbusier's obsession with the axis at the acropolis is his obsession with the promenade.[2] The axis organizes man with nature. The axis is precisely calculated so the visitor will be brought to the Parthenon from the Propylaea. Banham states that the axis is the route by which one is traversed, or a vista along which the buildings can be seen.[3] The axis is the driver throughout the acropolis, much like the *promenade architecturale* is the driver through his villas.

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[1] Andrew Ayers, *The Architecture of Paris: An Architectural Guide* (London: Edition Axel Menges, 2004): 247.
[2] LeCorbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1986): 212.
[3] Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, Second Edition (Cambride, MA: The MIT Press, 1960): 227.

The evolution of the Roman axis into the *promenade architecturale* is not the only use of Roman ideals in Le Corbusier's buildings. Frampton describes Le Corbusier's struggle between the Arts and Crafts informality and the neoclassical geometries.[4] Le Corbusier used the golden section to organize his villas and create the facades. The classical order drove the form for his buildings, not the *promenade architecturale*. The promenade lead the visitor though the previously defined building, it did not change the shape of the perfect volumes.

Le Corbusier's Villa La Roche of 1923 most exemplifies his *promenade architecturale*. Le Corbusier wrote in *Vers Une Architecture* "In architecture, you must have a destination for your axis."[5] In Villa La Roche, banker Raoul La Roche gave Le Corbusier this destination with his large art collection. Von Moos describes the house as a frame for the presentation of the painting.[6] The house begins at a large, white entrance hall. In this hall, Von Moos writes that one to see the promenade, and thus the house all at once, like an entire poem read in a single glance.[7] From here, one climbs a staircase to a bridge that spans the open space, leading the visitor to the gallery, or he can continue into the dining room and other typical program. In the gallery, the visitor is confronted by a ramp. The ramp can serve as a viewing platform for the gallery, allowing the gallery to be experienced through time. The ramp leads to the destination of the promenade, the library, a place of meditation. The library also provides views down to the main hall, where the promenade began. The house is experienced all at once.

Le Corbusier used ribbon windows in Villa la Roche to drive and accentuate his *promenade architecturale* before assigning them as one of his five points of modern architecture.

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[4] Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, Fourth Edition (New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, Inc, 2007): 158.
[5] LeCorbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1986): 187.
[6] Stanislaus von Moos, *Le Corbusier Before Le Corbusier: Architectural Studies, Interiors, Painting and Photography, 1907-1922* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002): 42.
[7] Stanislaus von Moos, Le Corbusier Before Le Corbusier: Architectural Studies, Interiors, Painting and Photography, 1907-1922 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002): 42.

Le Corbusier proclaims that "large windows open up views of the exterior where the architectural unity is reasserted" in his *Oeuvre Complete*.[8] Here, the windows allow for a consistent reading throughout the building. The windows allow light into the building, and the visitor follows the steams of light though the promenade. The windows are strategically placed along the promenade, framing natural views based on the level in the villa.[9] In the main hall, openings create views to different parts of the house. Von Moos describes these views as suggestions, rather than actual views of the house.[10] The promenade begins with the eye, with glimpses of what is next to come. Considering the placement of the windows in the Villa la Roche, Le Corbusier did change his building for the *promenade architecturale*. He punctuated his perfect box to invite his visitor to experience the building on foot.

Niemeyer began his exploration of the promenade in his Brazilian Pavilion for the 1939 New York World's Fair. Le Corbusier's free plan was now a plastic concept built around a pond and garden. David Underwood attributes the curvilinear expression with Niemeyer's desire to express the rhythm of the water and the Brazilian *jeito*, which directly contrasts with the neoclassical rigidity of Le Corbusier.[11] The visitor enters the pavilion by a ramp leading to an open terrace with a view of the garden. The ramp is the Corbusian promenade, leading the visit to the ultimate goal, the garden. The promenade then turns into a labyrinth, unlike the strategic direction of Le Corbusier. The visitor can freely walk about the free plan, but is continuously led back to the garden, the apotheosis of the project. When seen through Ayer's reading of Le Corbusier's ability to reveal and conceal his project through the promenade, Niemeyer is doing

[8] Tim Benton, *The Villas of Le Corbusier 1920-1930* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987): 43.
[9] Tim Benton, *The Villas of Le Corbusier 1920-1930* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987): 61.
[10] Stanislaus von Moos, *Le Corbusier Before Le Corbusier: Architectural Studies, Interiors, Painting and Photography, 1907-1922* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002): 42.
[11] David Underwood, *Oscar Niemeyer and the Architecture of Brazil* (New York, NY: Rizzoli Internatioal Publications, Inc., 1994): 46.

the same thing by allowing the visitor to stray from the garden to explore the pavilion, but the garden is continuously revealed to him. The building itself retains a basic form; only the curved ramp breaks the strict rectilinear. The curved forms of the free plan and what Frampton calls the fluidity and interpenetration of the promenade[12] begin to describe Niemeyer's fluid formal techniques.

Pampulha was envisioned as an "artificial utopia"[13] for the upper classes of Brazil. *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* wrote in its article on Niemeyer that the new architecture of Pampulha would reflect the country's desire for modernization.[14] Niemeyer was commissioned to build the forms around the artificial lake. The four buildings realized were a casino, a yacht club, a popular dance hall, and a church. Of the four, the casino most effectively uses the *promenade architecturale* in a new formal language. Niemeyer's created his casino with from three forms: a large rectangle for the entrance hall and casino, a small rectangle for administration and support staff, and pear-shaped area with the restaurant and dance hall. The three elements are linked by the *promenade architecturale*. As in the Brazilian Pavilion, the visitor enters via a ramp, first experiencing the building in a double-height entrance hall. At the end of the entrance hall is a zigzag ramp, providing views to the entrance hall. Here, one chooses to go to the gallery, the gambling room, or the dance hall. From the entrance hall, the visitor can bypass the ramp with a small staircase that leads directly to the gallery. Following the gallery, the visitor can meet with the top of the ramp. The gallery then splits into two ramps. One circumvents the stage to the pear-shaped dance hall while the other links the restaurant and

[12] Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, Fourth Edition (New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, Inc, 2007): 254.

[13] David Underwood, *Oscar Niemeyer and the Architecture of Brazil* (New York, NY: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1994): 54.

[14] "Pampulha, Tropical and Modern," *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, Nov-Dec 2007: 70

kitchen in the smaller rectangular volume. An external staircase then links the restaurant to the outdoor garden, which is directly behind the ramp and main entrance hall.

Niemeyer makes use of the entrance hall in the Casino much like Le Corbusier made use of the entrance hall at the Villa La Roche. Le Corbusier uses a bridge over the hall to connect the building to the apex of the building, the gallery. While walking over the bridge, the building is understood in a single moment, the visitor sees the entrance, the gallery, and the normal program of the house. On the ramp at the casino, the visitor experiences the entirety of the double-height entrance hall, as well as glimpsing the gallery and casino space. Niemeyer applies Le Corbusier's obsession with the acropolis's ability to allow the visitor to view certain moments over time in his ramp. The visitor is consistently viewing the entrance hall, and he is only getting small suggestions of what is to come. Eduardo Comas writes that the push to the border of the hall via the ramp deemphasizes the hall, as it is no longer a resting point in the casino.[15] The promenade is moving too quickly, diminishing form. The duplicated height of the ramp only emphasizes the separation from the grand hall. The Corbusian reading of the ramp, as a way to experience the space, however, is more apt to apply to the casino than Comas' pessimistic view of the promenade.

When read through Le Corbusier's need for a destination for the axis, the culmination of Niemeyer's *promenade architecturale* is the dance hall and restaurant. The long ramp and undulating hallway gives way to a spectacular hall with pink tufted satin and a lit dance floor. The pear-shaped room is molded in a Baroque fashion, more Brazilian than the rigid geometries from before. When removed from the Corbusian reading, it seems that the circulation is circular. Once at the supposed destination, the visitor can discover the exterior stairway leading down to

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[15] Carlos Eduardo Dias Comas, "Niemeyer's Casino and the Misdeeds of Brazilian Architecture," in *Transculturation: Cities, Spaces and Architectures in Latin America*, ed. Felipe Hernandez, Mark Millington and Iain Borden, 169-188 (New York, NY: Editions Rodopi B.V., 1998): 174.

the garden. He then moves through this area to the casino. Moving down the staircase, one

discovers he is behind the entrance hall, the grand area he came through. The visitor is drawn

back to this main area, creating a cyclical promenade. Niemeyer's ability to create fluid forms

could stem from his freedom from the need for an apex to his circulation. The break from the

orthodoxy of the promenade leads to what *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* calls his break from the

orthodoxy of right angles.[16]

Niemeyer introduces a play between the served and the servant that is not present in Le

Corbusier's work, perhaps because the *promenade architecturale* was most prevalent in his

villas. Niemeyer created a separate volume for the servant, the small rectangular volume on the

right of the building, but he needed to intertwine the service and the customer in the dance hall

and restaurant. Underwood describes backstage access to the dance floor as a "spatial funnel.[17]"

An elliptical double corridor precludes wait staff and gamblers from coming into contact. The

separation between the served and servant leads to a labyrinth of interlocking routes, which

Frampton says gives the casino a theatrical atmosphere.[18] The building now has multiple

promenades acting simultaneously and converging at strategic points. In the pear-shaped dance

hall and restaurant, the doubling of the promenade reinforces the undulating form.

Sarah Vivanco writes in "Trope of the Tropics" that Niemeyer's intertwining of modern

and Baroque principles creates an elaborate formalism that heightens the mystery of the

promenade architecturale.[19] She specifically calls upon Niemeyer's tendency to invert inside and

outside, seen in the exterior staircase linking the restaurant to the garden at the Casino. The

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[16] "Pampulha, Tropical and Modern," *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, Nov-Dec 2007: 70.
[17] David Underwood, *Oscar Niemeyer and the Architecture of Brazil* (New York, NY: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1994): 60.
[18] Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, Fourth Edition (New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, Inc, 2007): 255.
[19] Sandra Isabella Vivanco, "Trope of the Tropics: The Baroque in Modern Brazilian Architecture, 1940-1950," in *Transculturation: Cities, Spaces and Architectures in Latin America*, ed. Felipe Hernandez, Mark Millington and Iain Borden, 189-201 (New York, NY: Editions Rodopi B.V., 1998): 195.

labyrinth is no longed based on the server and the servant, but the constant change between interior and exterior, experiencing Baroque formalism from multiple vantage points. When reading through Vivanco, however, the promenade no longer shapes the building, but the building shapes the promenade. Form is no longer a consequence of Niemeyer's elaborate promenade. The Baroque aesthetic in Brazil drives form, thus drives the promenade to be the labyrinthine and theatrical experience Frampton lauds.[20]

Brazilian architecture is grounded in the Baroque, which was brought by Europeans in the form of churches meant to convert the locals. When Lucio Costa brought *Vers Une Architecture* to Brazil, the ideologies were imported through Baroque formalism rather than neoclassical shapes. Niemeyer deftly combined the Corbusian *promenade architecturale* with his Baroque heritage to create undulating forms driven by circulation. Frampton lauded Niemeyer for his ability to have the promenade articulate the space of the building.[21] Le Corbusier's promenade was trapped in a neoclassical box.

Niemeyer's critics say the architect is overly formal and does not respond to the problems modernism is trying to address, such as mass production, speed, and standardization. The critics chastise Niemeyer for his "empty formalism."[22] Le Corbusier, alternatively, believed the house was a "machine for living in" and sought to find the most efficient, standardized methods for his villas. *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* believes that Niemeyer, although not taking on modern ideals, created a unifying optimism with his buildings at Pampulha.[23] Niemeyer said that architecture is bigger than the forms themselves, and did not seek to align himself with modernist

[20] Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, Fourth Edition (New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, Inc, 2007): 255.

[21] Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, Fourth Edition (New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, Inc, 2007): 255.

[22] Sandra Isabella Vivanco, "Trope of the Tropics: The Baroque in Modern Brazilian Architecture, 1940-1950," in *Transculturation: Cities, Spaces and Architectures in Latin America*, ed. Felipe Hernandez, Mark Millington and Iain Borden, 189-201 (New York, NY: Editions Rodopi B.V., 1998): 197.

[23] "Pampulha, Tropical and Modern," *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, Nov-Dec 2007: 72.

ideologies.[24] His formal alignment was to the Baroque, the language of Brazil. Niemeyer, thus, did not strive for the machine aesthetic of Le Corbusier, allowing his promenade to flow throughout his casino, composing the space rather than design inside a pre-defined neoclassical element. While Le Corbusier only allowed the promenade to change window placement, Niemeyer's use of a continuous promenade and intertwining multiple promenades lends to a more fluid form, wrapping around circulation.

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[24] David Underwood, *Oscar Niemeyer and Brazilion Free-form Modernism* (New York, NY: George Braziller, Inc., 1994): 39.

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