

{ DESIGN }

This year marks the centenary of the birth of the remarkable architect Lina Bo Bardi, writes Jonathan Cane

HER house was almost silent and smelled of burning coffee; visitors ascended and descended hushed, exploring the Casa de Vidro (Glass House) with guilty pleasure. Nothing's hidden — it's hard to hide stuff when there are no walls. Statues and fetishes sit next to custom-designed furniture, all in plain view. The Casa de Vidro, built by the late architect Lina Bo Bardi in 1951 for herself and her husband on the hills of São Paulo, is more than just a home, albeit a remarkable one; it is a philosophical act.

The house is raised on spindly columns so it looks something like a tree house. There were almost no trees when the couple originally moved in, but now the garden is a forest. One tall tree grows through the middle of the house.

You enter into a single open room, pale blue mosaic tiles on the floor, soft floor-length curtains, and — windows. The entire front and sides of her house are glass, and while there would have been a view when Bo Bardi moved in, now it feels like the windows are keeping the plants out like nosy neighbours. Bo Bardi was deeply concerned with the human relationship to nature and Casa de Vidro gives us a small glimpse of her green thinking.

Inside there's a peculiar quality of cosiness, odd for a glass house. The furnishings are rich, textured and patterned. A chair she designed called the Bowl Chair, along with horn-shaped door handles, have gone on to be reproduced after her death and are now available in stores. Light enters the home from every side, sneaking between leaves, casting glad shadows.

Round the back are the bedrooms, kitchen and bathrooms. Contemporary houses sometimes place more emphasis on what Bo Bardi considered the back-end, the bits she tucked behind the house.



Windows into genius

The private part of the home is grounded on the hillside and has a very different sensibility. The kitchen is long and narrow like a galley and is not what most of us would think of as “modern”.

The open-plan kitchen has become such a dominant idea that it seems odd to create an open-plan house with the kitchen shoved in the back. Bo Bardi was a vocal feminist but it would be reading too much into it to say that her design banished the kitchen because of her politics; in fact to this day open-plan kitchens are not popular in Brazil and a closed door while cooking is mandatory.

I do struggle to imagine Bo Bardi in a kitchen. It's easier to picture her in her role as museum director, collector, illustrator, craftsperson. She was however working in a time and a place that boasted brilliant and powerful men, not least her art-critic husband.

Architects like Oscar Niemeyer built entire cities and drew international attention from the early '40s. Craftsmen like Athos Bulcão, who designed dramatic mosaics, tended to upstage Bo Bardi's more humble vernacular craftwork.

Bo Bardi refused to be relegated to the kitchen. She conceived, designed and curated two of São Paulo's most important buildings. The first, Museu de Arte de São

'What she made was never stylish or trendy or even beautiful, but terrifying and real'

Paulo, is a profoundly intelligent concrete art gallery lifted off the ground by red armatures, which has now fallen into a sad state because the administrators have

strayed from her original vision. The second space, a vibrant cultural centre called SESC Fábrica da Pompéia, is a regenerated factory and the best example of Bo Bardi's concern with what we would now call “sustainability”. For her this concept dealt with a radically altered notion of community, humility of materials, and buildings that promoted a connectedness of life. Pompéia is a dynamic social space where old men read newspapers, students study, kids kick balls, and others suntan on the wooden decks.

Last year Hans Ulrich Obrist curated an exhibition about Bo Bardi's work that was staged simultaneously at SESC Pompéia and Casa de Vidro. The show, called *The Insides Are on the Outside*, was an extended meditation on her approach not only to architecture but also to how we could live better in our space. The invited artists staged

performances, built sculptures, delivered lectures and turned her house into a home-museum.

One artwork had to do with the Marxist approach to aesthetics Bo Bardi proposed. The work was a coffee smell and audio piece that, as Ulrich Obrist writes, evoked an anecdote told by frequent visitors to the glass home. “Apparently, when guests were gathered around the fireplace and the conversation headed toward political/ideological themes, and Lina started to express her socialist ideologies, Mr Bardi would interrupt the conversation and say: ‘Lina, go make some coffee.’”

Her ideas still make many people uneasy because what she made was never stylish or trendy or even beautiful, but terrifying and real and brutal. These words don't sit easily in our current architectural vocabulary. **LS**
jonathancanegreenoil@gmail.com

waiting for hi-res