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RADICAL MODERNS

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THE BRUTALIST RUIN

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A brutalist house built in the city of Sao Paulo, by architect David Ottoni for his own family, is the subject of this photographic essay. A superposition of images produced in two different periods: the earlier were made by the architect himself around the early 1970s; the latter, of my authorship, were taken between 2013 and 2015, as part of a master's degree project on brutalist architecture and the image of its ruin. The architect David Ottoni, my father, was a student and disciple of Vilanova Artigas, and lived in the house for thirty years; I, a professional photographer, for seventeen years.

The first moment is full of optimism and expectation. We see a large fair-faced concrete block, sculpturally seating on a sloping terrain, with few neighbors, which leaves the recently unmolded structure completely free within the landscape. Some wooden molds on the ground confirm the recent unmolding. Above it, the opposition of a large vertical water tank, also in concrete: function becomes adornment. The set may be seen from the distance and stands out from the surrounding conventional buildings for its radicalism and its vigor. It is impossible not to believe that a better future will arise from such architecture.

The Paulista Brutalism only began to be studied as a school inserted in and synchronic with the international trend, heiress of the Corbusian *béton brut*, several years after its decline, since a great deal of their authors rejected the connection. It is in the thesis of Ruth Verde Zein (2007), one of its most prolific researchers, that I find the following definition, by the author Renato Pedio, written in 1959:

'Brutalism would be a taste for self-sufficient architectural objects, aggressively seated in their surroundings, an energetic affirmation of structure, the vengeance of mass and plasticity against the



matchbox and shoebox aesthetics' (Pedio, 1959 cited in Zein, 2007, p.21, our translation¹).

Zein considers Pedio's definition 'baroque'. And yet we could discuss for hours what would be a matchbox and shoebox aesthetics, but I couldn't find a better description for the structure I see in the architect's photos. The brutalists were modern radicals, without a doubt. Radicals in their aesthetic formulations, radicals in their ethical pretensions, maybe in the attempt of bringing back *avant-garde* ambitions to the accommodated modernism of the Post-World War II period. And probably its last gasp, since almost simultaneously with the apex of international and Paulista Brutalism, the first postmodern criticisms began to emerge.

In the second series of photos, the concrete block is no longer visible, the neighborhood is completely occupied and their view is blocked. Around the deteriorating house, flora has begun its reconquest: it grows uncontrolled in the garden, occupying the pavement, invading the rooms. The first series is a 'snapshot' -- all images were made on the same day. The second monitors, for a few years, the building's recent decay process. The growth and verticalization of the surroundings blocked the view from and the lighting to the house. However, there are no clear signs of ruins at a first glance. The fair-faced concrete rusts from within and almost remains unchanged to the eye; toughened glass panels either break as a whole and disappear, or remain intact, only covered with dust. The attempt to maintain this unused space is complex: dust, soil and plants invade grooves in the windows and in the concrete, obstruct pipes, make the swimming pool (also in fair-faced concrete) menacing.

The overlapping of these images dialogues with two fundamental issues to the very history of photographic language: its narrow link with the Modernist Architecture, in a first moment, and its insertion into the contemporary imagery of ruin, in a second one.

Photography and architecture are directly connected since the invention of the former in the 1820s. The first photo in history was of a building: starting with Niépce's rooftops (*View from the Window at Le Gras*), from 1826, until the appearance of the first human being in a Parisian street view, made by Daguerre twelve years later (*Paris Boulevard*), buildings and the city were usual subjects due to the long exposure times needed for the plate sensitization. The picture made in 1826, for example, took more than eight hours of exposure: its subject could not move. After the invention and commercialization of the daguerreotype (from 1839 on), the technique became more and more responsive, and photographers went around the world documenting architecture and ruins throughout Europe, Asia and Africa.

'Architecture is, assumedly, a cultural product that exists in the intersection of its physical presence and its visual representation, which extends from the project, drawings, perspective and models

¹ **From the original in Portuguese:** 'Brutalismo seria um gosto por objetos arquitetônicos autossuficientes, agressivamente situados em seu entorno, seria uma afirmação energética da estrutura, a vingança da massa e da plasticidade sobre a estética das caixas de fósforos e caixas de sapatos' (Pedio, 1959 apud Zein, 2007, p.21).



that precede its construction until the dissemination of photographic images that follow it' (Rocha, 2013, p.47, our translation²).

We know buildings primarily through their images. Photography transforms matter into signs, and physical experience into visual narrative, giving architecture a symbolic value, prestige, and permanence. Photography is the modern technique of representation *par excellence*, and modern architecture, which came later, emerged already linked to it. The evidence of that narrow bond are some partnerships between modernist architects and photographers: Le Corbusier and Lucien Hervé, Mies van der Rohe and Bill Engdahl, Richard Neutra and Julius Shulman are a few examples. Specifically in the last case, the symbioses between the duo calls attention, generating two great independent works -- while Neutra has created an iconic architectural style based on European values, Shulman's photographs have constructed an iconic ideal of the 'American life' through Neutra's houses he documented at the time. It would be impossible today to witness the same experience of Shulman's images even in the few preserved houses, since the surroundings have changed irreversibly. 'These photographs are the icons of a 'future nostalgia', made at a time when almost everyone was convinced that the future reliably promised that better was yet to come' (Rocha, 2013, p.50, our translation³).

The idea of a *future nostalgia* could also be applied to the feeling that Andreas Huyssen perceives in the new fever for ruins and their imagery since the early 21st century. Our ability of imagining the future has declined with the exhaustion of modern thinking, and it is from that expectation that we became nostalgic today. To Huyssen (2014, p.89, our translation⁴), a 'consciousness of the obscure side of modernity' was already present in literature and modern arts, particularly after World War I, but not in architecture, always focused on the future and progress.

'The modern imagination of ruins was fundamentally molded by Simmel and Benjamin, and, in a different way, by Kafka and Beckett. [...] Around 80 years ago, Walter Benjamin, a modern critic *par excellence*, already recognized the static attraction of what he called *irresistible decline*. And he interpreted ruin as an allegory, saying that allegories, in the field of thoughts, are what ruins are in the field of things' (Huyssen, 2014, p.90, our translation⁵).

² **From the original in Portuguese:** 'A arquitetura é, assumidamente, um produto cultural que existe na intersecção de sua presença física e sua representação visual, que se estende do projeto, desenhos, perspectiva e maquetes que antecedem sua construção até a disseminação de imagens fotográficas que a sucede' (Rocha, 2013, p.47).

³ **From the original in Portuguese:** 'Essas fotografias são ícones de uma nostalgia do futuro, feitas em um tempo em que quase todos estavam confiantes na promessa de que o melhor estava por vir' (Rocha, 2013, p.50).

⁴ **From the original in Portuguese:** 'consciência do lado obscuro da modernidade' (Huyssen, 2014, p.89).

⁵ **From the original in Portuguese:** 'A imaginação moderna das ruínas foi fundamentalmente moldada por Simmel e Benjamin, e, de modo diferente, por Kafka e Beckett. [...] Cerca de 80 anos atrás, Walter Benjamin, crítico modernista por excelência, já reconhecia a atração estática daquilo que chamava de declínio irresistível. E interpretou a ruína como alegoria, ao dizer que as alegorias, no campo dos pensamentos, são o que são as ruínas no campo das coisas' (Huyssen, 2014, p.90).



The overlapping of past, present and future proposed by Walter Benjamin, and their allegoric relationship between ruin and history, are part of a tradition that exploits the hybridism between past and present which Svetlana Boym, Russian professor of literature based in Harvard, who passed away in 2015, qualifies as *off-modern*. A group of thinkers and artists, including Igor Stravinsky, Julio Cortázar, Milan Kundera, Vladimir Nabokov, among others, carries such temporal hybridism and 'mediate between modernists and post-modernists, frustrating the scholars' (Boym, 2001, p.31, our translation⁶).

Svetlana Boym develops the idea of a *reflective nostalgia*, with a critical and blasphemous meaning, in opposition to a *restorative nostalgia*, which evokes the past as undeniable value to the present. In her essays of the book *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), she goes through the post-communist ruins of cities such as St. Petersburg, Moscow and Berlin, and the thought of authors 'exiled' from their country (such as herself), in the identification of this new sense of nostalgia.

'Restoration (from re-staure -- re-establishment) signifies a return to the original stasis, to the prelapsarian moment. The past for the restorative nostalgic is a value for the present; the past is not a duration but a perfect snapshot. [...] Reflective nostalgia is more concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude. Re-flection suggests new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis. The focus here is not on recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth but on the meditation on history and the passage of time' (Boym, 2001, p.49, our translation⁷).

Photography is also ruin, in the Benjaminian sense, a fragment that 'loosely drifts in a flexible and abstract past', in the words of Susan Sontag (2004, p.86, our translation⁸). But the photographs appreciate getting old -- 'the photos, when they become scrofulous, dimmed, stained, cracked, faint, still have a good aspect; often even better' (Sontag, 2004, p.94, our translation⁹). To accept time's passage is not so simple when we deal with brutalist architecture. Its contempt for the past becomes clear in its ruins: no peeled-off walls glamour, nor debris or color variations. The brutalist ruin keeps itself whole in the panorama, gray as always. Destruction is structural, inward. Nature's retaking, in the lines of Georg Simmel's ruin, will be much longer. While it doesn't take place, nature becomes its backdrop and its occupant.

⁶ **From the original in Portuguese:** 'fazem uma mediação entre modernistas e pós-modernistas, frustrando os acadêmicos' (Boym, 2001, p.31).

⁷ **From the original in Portuguese:** 'Restauração (de re-instauração – re-estabelecimento) significa um retorno para o equilíbrio original, para o momento pré-queda. O passado para a nostalgia restauradora é um valor para o presente, o passado não é uma duração mas um snapshot perfeito. [...] A nostalgia reflexiva está mais preocupada com o tempo histórico e individual, com a irrevocabilidade do passado e a finitude humana. Re-flexão sugere nova flexibilidade, não o restabelecimento do equilíbrio. O foco aqui não é recuperar o que é percebido como uma verdade absoluta, mas como meditação sobre história e passagem do tempo' (Boym, 2001, p.49).

⁸ **From the original in Portuguese:** 'solto à deriva num passado flexível e abstrato' (Sontag, 2004, p.86).

⁹ **From the original in Portuguese:** 'as fotos, quando ficam escrofulosas, embaçadas, manchadas, rachadas, empalidecidas, ainda têm um bom aspecto; muitas vezes até um aspecto melhor' (Sontag, 2004, p.94).

On the other side, perhaps the nostalgic effect of the modernist architecture ruin is especially strong in Brazil, due to the role that such architecture and the creation of Brasília have exerted in the very construction of a new national identity, internally and externally. Perhaps for such reason, the Brazilian modernism becomes a *place of memory*, using Pierre Nora's concept for spaces where memory materializes (Nora, 1993), and is rapidly transformed into legacy.

As for the brutalism of the Paulista school, problematizing its ruins, besides questions of physical orders, brings other equally specific: to restore or to catalogue such buildings as historical wouldn't be the very contradiction of the aesthetics in which they were conceived?

This essay is part of the same title of master's research I develop in FAUUSP under the guidance of Professor Dra. Giselle Beiguelman.

ABOUT THE IMAGES:

All photos were taken at the Janne Ottoni Residence, designed by architect David Ottoni, located at Rua Três Irmãos, 727 in the city of São Paulo.

Images from 1973 (approximately, it was not possible to determine the date) are by architect David Ottoni; images taken between 2013-15 are by Ana Ottoni.

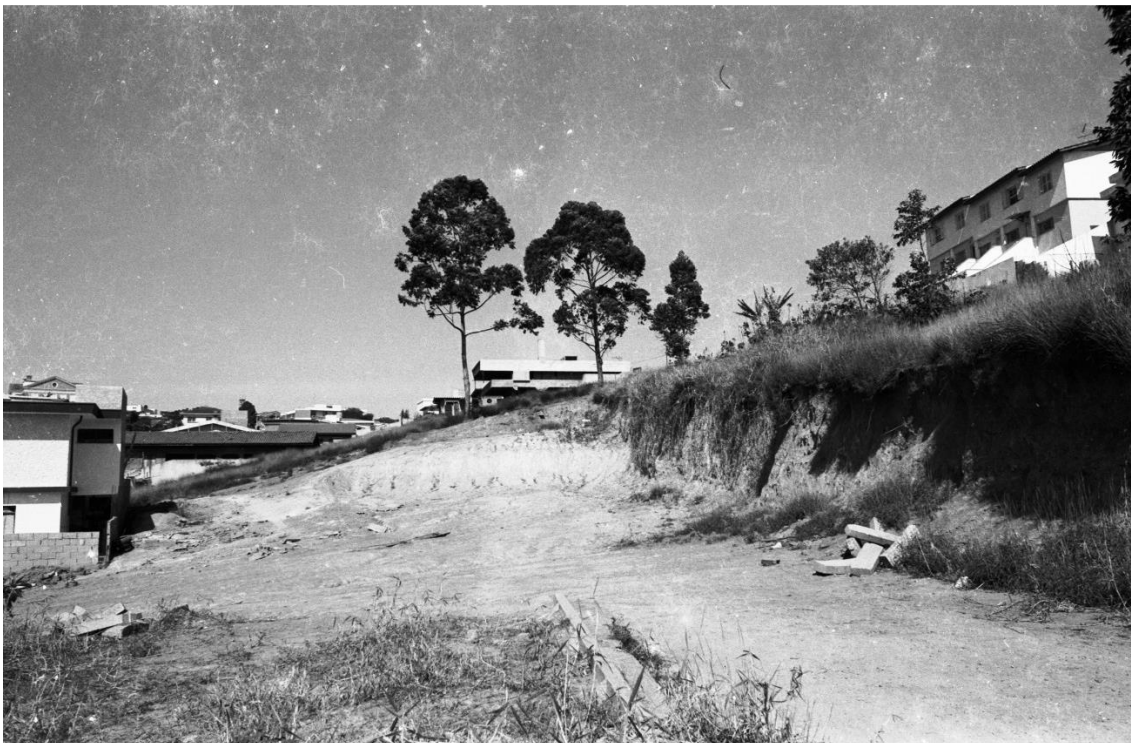


Photo 1. Construction works at Janne Ottoni residence. Northwest façade. Photography by David Ottoni, c.1973.



Photo 2. Janne Ottoni residence. Northeast façade.
Photography by Ana Ottoni, February 2015.

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Photo 3. Janne Ottoni residence. Internal view.
Photography by Ana Ottoni, February 2015.



Photos 4/5. Janne Ottoni residence. Pool view.
Photography by Ana Ottoni, August 2014.



residence. Pool view.



Photo 6. Janne Ottoni residence. Roof slab.
Photography by Ana Ottoni, October 2014.



Photo 7. Janne Ottoni residence. Closing of the pool.
Photography by Ana Ottoni, March 2015.

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Photo 8. Construction works at Janne Ottoni residence. Northwest façade. Photography by David Ottoni, c.1973.



Photo 9. Demolition of a neighboring building next to Janne Ottoni residence. Photography by Ana Ottoni, November 2012.



Photo 10. Janne Ottoni residence. Sweeping of the inner hall. Photography by Ana Ottoni, July 2014.

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