FOREIGN PROFESSIONALS AND MODERNIZATION OF ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM: ADALBERTO SZILARD IN RÍO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL

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ABSTRACT
This article analyzes the contributions of the Hungarian engineer and architect Adalberto Szilard to the modernization of architecture and urbanism in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, for the period of 30 years, from the 1920s to the 1950s. Szilard emigrated to Brazil in 1926 and settled down in Rio de Janeiro. His constant movement between the fields of architecture and urbanism, from architectural design to urban planning theory, illustrates the deep relation between architecture and the city. His theoretical and practical work is to a large extent, registered in articles published in journals, such as, “Revista Municipal de Engenharia”, and “Revista Arquitetura e Urbanismo”. Those papers show his criticism and his proposals related to urban matters, and his concerns the city traffic, the protection of the hills and the preservation of historic parts of the cities. Szilard was engaged in a long debate with the modern movement and the ideas of Le Corbusier, that changed from the support to the rejection of those ideas. This discussion included issues, such as, the processes of centralization and decentralization. In the article “À margem das Conferências de Le Corbusier” [Nearby the lectures of Le Corbusier] in
1936, he produced one of the earliest records of modern urbanism in our country, related to the opening of Presidente Vargas Avenue, subscribing to the new ideas. Nevertheless, in 1950, in the book “Urbanismo no Rio de Janeiro” [Urbanism in Rio de Janeiro], he reviewed his previous position by recognizing the inability of the modern movement to cope with the existing cities. From the late 1940s, he supported establishing of a City Planning program at the University of Brazil, becoming one of its first faculty members.

INTRODUCTION

This article examines the career of Adalberto Szilard, highlighting his contribution to modernization of the theory and practice of architecture and urbanism, particularly in the city of Rio de Janeiro starting in 1926, when he emigrated from Europe to Brazil.

Figure 1 - ROXO, Stélio. Revista do Clube de Engenharia, 1956, p. 3. Szilard at his drawing table.

1 This article results from a historiographical research done in the documental and iconographical archive kept by the Szilard relatives, as well as, interviews with his descendents.
Adalberto Szilard was born in the city of Györ, in Hungary, on April 23, 1899, with the original name Bèla Szilard. After three years at the Budapest School of Fine Arts, he switched to the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, where he took degrees in engineering and architecture. After a few years, the crisis situation in Europe in the early 1920s and the consequent difficulty of finding work led him to decide to emigrate. Based on information that Brazil and Canada both offered ample job opportunities, he decided to go to Brazil, even though he had no contacts in the country and did not speak Portuguese.

Soon after arriving in 1926, he met some important people in architectural circles and only six weeks afterward he got his first job, with the firm of Robert R. Prentice in Rio de Janeiro, where he stayed until 1939 when he opened his own office.

By this time, Szilard had become a naturalized Brazilian citizen. Fluent in Hungarian, German and French, he kept current with the latest architectural and urban planning developments through European magazines. His professional career was marked by an impressive theoretical and practical output, in the form of published articles, especially in the magazines Revista Municipal de Engenharia and Revista de Arquitetura e Urbanismo in the 1930s through the 1950s.

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2 The city’s name in German is Raab.
3 In this period, he had changed his name to Adalbert Szilard.
4 After receiving his degree in engineering, in 1923 he married Karola Gábor, a Hungarian painter.
5 Information about Szilard’s life in Hungary can be found in the book written by his wife in 1974.
6 He arrived in Rio de Janeiro with his wife, Karola Gábor Szilard, and two children, Agnes and João (né Johann). In Brazil the couple had two more children, Carolina and Pedro. Interview with João Szilard on August 12, 2010.
7 Szilard was also a musician and had worked as a violinist with the Vienna Philharmonic. In Brazil, he held chamber music concerts in his home with the participation of professional musician friends.
However, Szilard’s theoretical activity in the field of engineering dates to before his arrival in Brazil. He published two works in Europe related to reinforced concrete technology in 1924 and 1925.

In Brazil, between 1936 and 1942 he published studies in Revista de Arquitetura e Urbanismo entitled “Folhas de Informação” on questions related to civil construction, with the aim of providing guidance on the best dimensions for various structures, such as sporting venues and hotels.

**SZILARD: ARCHITECT AND ENGINEER**

In the 1920s and 30s, the firm of British architect Robert R. Prentice was one of the largest in the country, with offices in Porto Alegre, Salvador and São Paulo besides the main office in Rio de Janeiro (then the nation’s capital). Szilard rose quickly in the firm and soon became Prentice’s main collaborator, participating in design projects that marked the modernization of various cities, such as the Cinema Metro Passeio and the Castelo, Nilomex and Raldia buildings in Rio; Cinema Metro São Paulo in that city; the Sulacap buildings in both Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo; and the remodeling of the Lacerda Elevator in Salvador. In most of these designs, Prentice is credited as the author, but the effective contribution of Szilard is undeniable.

For example, he played an important role in the remodeling of the Lacerda Elevator, a symbol of the city of Salvador, which lifts passengers from the port area to the plateau where the main part of the city is located. The monument was built in 1873 under the direction of engineer Antonio Lacerda and over its history it had undergone several major reforms. In

8 “Ueber die technischen Probleme des Torkretverfahrens m. bes. Berücks. d. maschinellen Einrichtung” (1924) and “Das Torkretverfahren und seine technischen Probleme” (1925). The two publications cover the process of producing concrete in machines made by the German construction firm Torkret.

9 There were 27 of these “Information Sheet” articles written by him and published in Revista de Arquitetura e Urbanismo, Rio de Janeiro from 1936 to 1942.

10 The capital was moved to Brasilia in 1960.
1930, Adalberto Szilard and the architect Fleming Thiesen were responsible for giving the structure its current Art Deco look.

Another important participation was the designs for the Metro Passeio (1936) and Metro São Paulo (1938) movie theaters. In the design for the Metro Passeio, 30-meter beams supported the offices and terraces of the upper floors. The building also had two innovations: acoustic treatment and an air conditioning system, adopted afterward in other large cinemas.

The designs for the Castelo, Nilomex and Raldia buildings date from 1937. They were built in Esplanada do Castelo, in line with some ideas of the Agache Plan, such as the concept of the buildings enclosing a city block with an internal patio. The three buildings are currently landmarked by the Rio de Janeiro State Cultural Heritage Institute and are considered leading examples of Art Deco architecture in Rio de Janeiro.

11 This is a large flat area in downtown Rio that had been created by the leveling of Castelo Hill in the early 1920s.
12 Although not implemented, the plan, concluded in 1930 by the French architect Donat Alfred Agache, contributed to the discussions about the city’s problems.
In 1939 he left Prentice to open his own office13. The opportunity appeared when the state government launched a competition to help design and oversee construction of the new Dom Pedro II Train Station14,

13 In 1939, the misunderstandings with Prentice caused him to leave the office, according to Karola Szilard (1974, p. 68).
14 Better known as “Central do Brasil”, the station is the main arrival point for commuter trains running between downtown Rio and suburban municipalities.
in which Szilard was the winner, leading to a six-year contract (Karola Szilard, p. 69).

Among the projects designed or managed by his office, the standouts were, besides the adaptation of design for Dom Pedro II Train Station, the Metro Tijuca, Metro Recife and Metro Santos cinemas, the Austrian Embassy and Santo Amaro High School. He also worked for the firm Graça Couto, where he adapted the design of the American Embassy in the early 1950s, when he had moved beyond Art Deco.

On the Dom Pedro II Station project, Szilard served as consulting architect for the committee that directed the construction and supplied the final concept for the station and building. In the last chapter of his book Urbanismo no Rio de Janeiro (1950), he recounts the history of the design and construction, clarifying that he was not the author of the original design, which was Roberto Magno de Carvalho. Some references attribute the design to Prentice’s firm and others to Szilard’s, but according to his own words in the book, the work started when he was still with Prentice in
1937, and he took charge in 1939, after he had left to found his own office, with the collaboration of the architect Géza Heller15. (Szilard & Reis, 1950, p. 150).

Figure 6 - Szilard & Reis, 1950, p. 155. Dom Pedro II Station.

His concern for urbanism accompanied his architecture, and in 1943 he wrote a memorial about the use of the land plots located in the area surrounding the station, aware of their imminent appreciation in value due to the construction of Avenida Presidente Vargas (1944), which would become the city’s main thoroughfare. Szilard criticized some points of the urbanization project being carried out by the municipal administration for the nearby areas, which called for 22-storey buildings along the avenue, and instead proposed a height limit 10 floors, in respect for the proportions of the new station’s building and the neighboring Palácio da Guerra (headquarters of the Defense Ministry). He also initially recommended that the commuter rail lines run underground in the downtown area, but faced with the impossibility of changing the recently constructed lines, he proposed the construction of buildings elevated six meters above ground in certain areas as a possible solution, drawing

15 In some bibliographic references they are cited as co-authors of the design.
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inspiration from Park Avenue in New York. He also expressed his concern for the preservation of buildings with historic value and elements of the local landscape.

Figure 7 - Szilard & Reis, 1950, pp. 152-153. Proposal for urbanization of the area near Dom Pedro II Station and axonometric view of the design.

At the time of construction of the new American Embassy building in 1951, Szilard visited the United States. On returning to Brazil he was diagnosed as having a serious heart condition, which changed his professional life and was partly responsible for his decision to enter teaching.
ADHESIONS AND REACTIONS TO MODERNISM

Szilard was one of the first to support the modernist principles, soon after the second visit of Le Corbusier to Brazil in 193616, when the famous French architect spent four weeks in Rio de Janeiro. The trip was at the suggestion of several Brazilian architects, especially Lúcio Costa, made to Gustavo Capanema, minister of education and health, to invite Le Corbusier for consultation on the Ministry of Education and Health’s project for its new headquarters building in the Esplanada de Castelo district and the new campus of Rio de Janeiro Federal University (Cidade Universitária). During his visit, Le Corbusier held five conferences, marked by his innovative ideas and capacity for exposition.

Le Corbusier’s principles impressed those present at his lectures and based on them many Brazilian urban planners expressed support for the

16 Le Corbusier first visited Rio de Janeiro in 1929, when he was on his way to São Paulo, Montevideo and Buenos Aires.
principles of the International Congresses on Modern Architecture (CIAM). Adalberto Szilard, two months later, already used them in the article “À margem das conferências de Le Corbusier” (1936) and proposed solutions that appeared to be the first expression of adhesion to the new ideas in Brazil. His sketches covered the future Av. Presidente Vargas, for which he proposed, without any commitment to dimensions, the separation of pedestrians and vehicles with roads at ground level and pedestrian walkways and stores on the second level, according to the ideas of modern urbanism.

Figure 9 - Szilard. Arquitetura e Urbanismo, 1936, p. 165. Proposal for Avenida Presidente Vargas.

Several years later, Szilard also promoted the ideas of Le Corbusier in an article called “Cidades do Amanhã” (“Cities of Tomorrow”, 1943), in

17 The English urbanist Thomaz Sharp, in his book Town Planning, considered the Voisin Plan impractical.
which he reiterated the principles of the Voisin Plan (1925) for Paris, rebutting the criticisms leveled by Thomaz Sharp. He proposed a city for one million people, with exclusive streets for vehicles, a subway system, buildings on stilts so as to allow more ground space and verticalization with the simultaneous creation of free areas. His adhesion to modern urbanism was now clear.

But Roxo, in dealing with the professional biography of Szilard, comments on his incapacity for modernist euphoria:

“Although it was possible to create everything and appeared even easier to destroy everything – it was impossible to completely win over a European well over the age of 30, already professionally crystallized within a system that several centuries of civilization had conditioned.” (Roxo, 1956, p. 6)

Within this line, Szilard later sought a synthesis of the different conditions of urbanism, rejecting a large part of the modernist ideal that he had previously appeared to support. In his book “Urbanismo no Rio de Janeiro”, published in 1950, he tried to find a possible path among the different proposals for existing cities. He used the expression modern urbanism to designate an ample form of modernism with roots in the models recommended by the CIAM and other contemporary proposals, but more organic ones, such as those developed by Saarinen18. According to him:

“Urban plans should be based on ample investigations of the local conditions. Knowledge of the topography, hydrography and geology of the city and the ways of living and tendencies of its population are indispensable elements that influence the urban plan.” (Szilard & Reis, p. 20)

The most interesting theories of Gaston Bardet, according to Szilard, were the methods employed in social topography, which contemplated

18 Saarinen, in his book A cidade, seu desenvolvimento, sua decadência e futuro (1943).
gathering information on the city, region and lifestyle of the inhabitants. His view of urban planning thus paid attention to studies in various fields, moving away from the grandiose schemes proposed by modernism.

In the book, at the same time he tried once again to apply the concepts of Le Corbusier, as expressed in the Voisin Plan for Paris of 1925, in the downtown area of Rio de Janeiro, he also reproduced ideas contrary to the centralization proposed by Le Corbusier. He contrasted the Frenchman’s proposals for concentration and high density with those of Frank Lloyd Wright, who urged dispersion and low density, to conclude that both were radical proposals and it was necessary to return attention to other urbanists who proposed improvements in existing cities. His attention in this respect centered on Patrick Geddes and his disciple Lewis Munford, as well as Werner Hegemann, and moved away from the modernist urban design program.

**URBANISM IN RIO DE JANEIRO**

As mentioned, in 1950 Adalberto Szilard published the book “Urbanismo no Rio de Janeiro”, with the participation of the engineer José de Oliveira Reis in one of its chapters. The book was partly drawn from Szilard’s writings in the 1940s and focused on the problems of the city of Rio de Janeiro, then the Federal District, synthesizing the general tenets of contemporary urbanism, considered essential for city planning.

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19 Bardet since the 1930s had written books on urbanism. Bardet’s influence in Brazil is stronger São Paulo and Belo Horizonte. In São Paulo, this movement was manifested in the work of the Dominican friar Louis Joseph Lebret.

20 Patrick Geddes (1865-1935) dedicated his life to biology and the study of human activities. Lewis Munford, a critic of the ideas of Le Corbusier, was a vociferous advocate of decentralization. Werner Hegemann (1882-1936) became famous for his campaign to decentralize Berlin in 1912.

21 The book contains illustrations by his son, João Szilard, an engineer and assistant in his office.
The professional environment of engineering and architecture in Rio de Janeiro, especially in the 1930s and 40s, was intense, composed of highly qualified professionals, among them the two authors, Adalberto Szilard and José de Oliveira Reis, along with Armando de Godoy, Lúcio Costa, José Octávio Saboya Ribeiro, Carmem Portinho and Affonso Eduardo Reidy, whose interests in the growth and development of cities helped consolidate the field of urbanism in the city.

Besides this, since the 1920s architects and engineers, particularly Armando de Godoy, had fought for a continuing planning process in the city and for the preparation of a master plan. At the end of the 1920s, the Agache Plan had been concluded, and during the following decade the Federal District’s municipal government took some important measures in the sphere of urbanism, culminating with the creation of the City Planning Commission in 1937, besides projects and regulations. In 1945, the municipal administration structured its urban planning more clearly, with the creation of the Department of Urbanism. This was the professional context in which the book Urbanismo no Rio de Janeiro was published.

In the book Szilard showed his independence from any particular local political agenda or group. He expressed his distaste for the current paths taken by urban planning in the city, such as the modifications made to the Agache Plan’s proposals in relation to the height of buildings in the Esplanada do Castelo district and with other rules issued by municipal government, such as the Building Code, which by establishing constructive indexes served to inflate land prices.

Szilard, in his author’s foreword to the book (dated 1949), defined his objectives with the work and its limits, stressing that the book should not be taken as a comprehensive plan with statistical data:

“The first author finds it necessary to explain to the English reader, who expects to find in it a careful study of all aspects of town planning problems concerning the city of Rio, that he may be disappointed. ... The author merely intends to urge the people and the authorities of Rio to stop spoiling the magnificent landscape of the town by screening and
cutting off many of the most beautiful views with ugly buildings”. (Szilard & Reis, 1950, p. 8) 22

And he further justified the reasons for the book:

“Although everything other forward-thinking urbanists, and even I, have written to date appears to be wasted work, like speaking to the deaf and painting for the blind, I resolved to make one more attempt to explain the principles of contemporary urbanism, in simple and clear words.” (Szilard & Reis, 1950, p. 19)

Figure 10 - Szilard & Reis, 1950, book cover. Urbanismo no Rio de Janeiro.

He presented his main ideas and those of the authors on which they were based. Among them were Camillo Sitte; Arturo Soria, creator of the linear city; Ebenezer Howard and his followers, promoters of garden cities; Raymond Unwin and Eliel Saarinem and their proposals for organic decentralization; Toni Garnier and the industrial city; and Eric Gloeden and his ideas about concentric radial cities. He also talked about the proposals of Donat A. Agache, Le Corbusier, Louis Justement, Hans Bernouilli23, Patrick Guedes, Gaston Bardet, Lewis Munford and Werner Hegeman.

The book originated from a series of four articles published in Revista de Arquitetura in 1947 and was divided into twelve chapters, only one of them written by José de Oliveira Reis. The preface by Leopoldo Sondy treated the book as being solely written by Szilard, mentioning Reis as author of an additional chapter, appearing to indicate the inclusion of his chapter in a book already being prepared.24

In the first chapter, Szilard summarized the main ideas of the great contemporary urban policy thinkers. In the second, he discussed the main principles of the Agache Plan and detailed the principles employed by J.H. Foreshaw and Patrick Abercrombie in the 1943 plan for the County of London. In the third chapter, he warned of the need for urban planning to be democratic and criticized the way the municipal government had acted in opening Avenida Presidente Vargas urbanizing its surrounding area.

In the fourth chapter he reproduced an article presented at the Second Conference of Engineering and Industry, in 1946, in which he criticized Decree 30 of September 1942, regulating the extension of the industrial zone. The fifth chapter, “Cidades do amanhã” (“Cities of tomorrow”)

23 The architects Louis Justement and Hans Bernoulli focused their attention on the economic problems related to the revitalization of cities. The proposals of Justement, however, when depicted in drawings, have a clear modernist influence.

24 “This is what this book by the architect Adalberto Szilard shows us about the Marvelous City [Rio de Janeiro]. The work, already of great value, was given additional merit by the inclusion of the extensive text written by the engineer José de Oliveira Reis about the broad avenues of the Federal District.” (Szilard & Reis, 1950, p. 7)
had been published in Revista Municipal de Engenharia in 1943, in which he had proposed, as already mentioned, an ideal city based on the principles of Le Corbusier’s Voisin Plan for Paris (1925).

The sixth chapter, on the Rio de Janeiro Master Plan, by José de Oliveira Reis, summarized the studies carried out by the City Planning Commission and detailed the main lines of the plan and its principles regarding the city’s topography.

Chapters 7 to 10 reproduced the series “Morros Cariocas” (“Rio’s Hills”)26, published in 1947 in the magazine Arquitetura e Urbanismo. The first article, which kicked off the series, was based on the work presented by José de Oliveira Reis at the Congress of Urban Planning in Santiago, Chile in 1942. In this chapter, Szilard focused on the question of streets and their function in structuring a city and indicated the problem of the encroachment of buildings at the foot of Rio’s many hills. According to Szilard, these would be the ideal locations for major arteries, giving Copacabana as an example of how the traffic circulation problems could be resolved.

Both Szilard and Oliveira Reis considered it essential to conserve the city’s natural landscape and encouraged urban planners to take advantage of its topography. However, in the book there were curiously some clear divergences between the proposals of Oliveira Reis and Szilard, specifically with respect to the urban plan for the Peixoto neighborhood in Copacabana, which Szilard presented explicitly in the book.

Figure 11 - Szilard & Reis, 1950, p. 117. Szilard and his concern for preserving the original topography of Rio.

25 José de Oliveira Reis, chairman of the City Planning Commission (1937-1945) and director of the Federal District Department of Urban Planning (1945-1948).
26 “Carioca” is the adjective used to designate the city of Rio de Janeiro.
For Copacabana, Szilard formulated a proposal calling for at apartment buildings limited to 10 floors, schools located so that students walk to and from their homes without having to cross main streets and a population density of 352 people per hectare. The study also showed some solutions adopted by American planners in New York regarding the street system and flow of traffic on various levels, and in Detroit with the system of trains and roads in open depressions.

The last chapters complemented the theme of Rio’s many hills, covering Santo Antônio Hill, São Bento Hill, Dom Pedro II Station and its nearby Providência Hill and Outeiro da Glória Hill. For Szilard, the presence of these hills, instead of being seen as interferences to the expansion of buildings, should be viewed as important elements to define the overall functioning of the city. Besides this, respect for the city’s elevations and hills in the urban designs would be an esthetic advantage27, and consequently an economic one, because the original beauty of the hilly topography would be preserved, attracting tourists.

Regarding the plan to level Santo Antônio Hill, besides predicting future traffic problems on Avenida Rio Branco, he criticized the creation of more lots for commercial buildings and urged that the hill only be partially leveled. Fortunately, the repercussion of his ideas at least led the municipal government to modify the project of the architect Affonso Eduardo Reidy for the area resulting from the removal of the hill.

27 The author uses Morro da Viúva (“Widow’s Hill”) as an example of the damage to Rio’s natural beauty caused by the lack of planning by the municipal government.
Finally, in relation to Outeiro da Glória and São Bento hills, in separate chapters he presented urban studies aiming at preservation and valorization of the landscape and architectural aspects.

THE CONTRIBUTION AS AN EDUCATOR

In the 1950s, academic activities became Szilard’s main occupation. In 1951, after placing first in a public competition, he was appointed to a chair in urban design at the National College of Architecture. There he fought together with his colleagues for the establishment of a graduate program in urban planning, rather than just offering it as a class taken by graduate students of architecture, and when the proposal was accepted, he was given the chair in urban evolution (Roxo, 1956, p. 7).

In 1953 he was chosen in another public examination for a chair in descriptive geometry at the National School of Fine Arts, and two years later for a position teaching architecture and civil construction at the School of Engineering. He also received the honorary title of doctor of

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28 For Morro de São Bento, proposals were made based on the ideas of Clemens Holzmeinster, an Austrian architect, who in 1940 was hired to contribute suggestions for its urbanization.
physical sciences and mathematics at the University of Brazil. Although in this period his health declined, he continued his classroom activities.

During the period he devoted himself to academic life, he prepared a collection of pamphlets with annotations for the classes he gave in urban evolution. According to Roxo, Szilard,

“...viewed the renewal and planning of cities as a technique for land occupation that aimed to improve the well-being of the population, but argued that this must not be done without paying attention to the need to preserve elements that, due to their historic value, composed the permanent character, the peculiar physiognomy, of a community – its inalterable decor. He made himself heard in this particular, by teaching esthetic rules of urban composition that recalled the creation of streets and public squares in Europe during the Renaissance”. (Roxo, 1956, p.8).

Starting in 1953 he did most of his writing from his home in the nearby mountain town of Teresópolis, where he spent several days a week. He had already abandoned most of his activities as an architect and engineer, but continued his teaching. However, on December 5, 1955 he suffered a heart attack and died at the age of only 56.

**FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The story and production of Adalberto Szilard reveal a talented and idealistic architect, builder and urban planner. His technical knowledge allowed him to excel in multiple activities, using his critical sense to alert the municipal authorities, who he believed were not correctly planning the various projects that marked the city during those years and would thus bring future problems.

Besides this, his constant movement between architecture and urbanism sheds light on the indistinct boundaries between these two fields, especially from the perspective of a professional who wants to study, design and propose solutions. His contribution to teaching was also
important, particularly his key role in the establishment of urban planning as a separate graduate program at the College of Architecture, besides the influence he had on future professionals in all the classes he taught in the last years of his life.

His writings, especially his book “Urbanismo no Rio de Janeiro”, show he believed it is possible to have harmony between modernity and tradition. He had a prescient vision for his time, foreseeing various problems the city of Rio de Janeiro currently faces, particularly regarding traffic. He reflected on questions little discussed in his time related to the rational use of new forms of energy, for example proposing the use of solar panels on building rooftops to run air conditioning systems.

To sum up, Szilard was a leading light of architecture and urban planning, and made an important contribution to the modernization of these fields of knowledge in the city of Rio de Janeiro, modifying them with his reflection and practice, through critical texts and designs. According to Roxo:

*He brought us, as did a few other European architects who came here, everything we needed most at that time: technical rigor and the appeal of a tradition. His generation – the generation of reinforced concrete — was in its own way revolutionary.* (Roxo, 1956, p. 6).

Familiar with the ideas of the important theoreticians of his time and the problems of the Rio de Janeiro, he became one of the most respected architects and urban planners in his adopted city and inspired other professionals through his writings, teachings and belief in architecture and urbanism as instruments able to help transform society.

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