





# KING OF CURVES

Oscar Niemeyer worked with Le Corbusier, built Brasília and bent the rules of architecture beyond recognition. Even at 99, his creativity knows no bounds. By **Sue Chester**. Photograph by **Simon Norfolk**



Oscar Niemeyer's reputation precedes him; he is revered and feared in equal measure. As he approaches his 99th birthday he is the world's most senior practising architect, still dreaming up more concrete magic on a daily basis from 9am to 6pm.

Sunlight ricochets off the white walls and floor tiles as I stumble, blinking, into the Copacabana penthouse studio where the sea sparkles across a 270-degree vista. An assistant leads the way round a screen-like wall to the back, where the great Latin Creator is sitting squarely in an old bentwood chair in the centre of a small, dim annex crowded by books and drawing-boards, calmly smoking a plump cigar. Pristine in a cream shirt draped elegantly over a white T-shirt and sharply pressed grey trousers, he is clearly ready for another working day. Small in stature, his presence fills the space. He hurriedly turns towards his desk, feeling the surface for an ashtray. Realising his sight is poor, I find one to my left, pushing it over in his direction. He takes it with relief and politely stubs out his cigar.

With a legacy of roughly 500 disparate architectural works spread liberally throughout Brazil and the world, amassed over a 70-year career, how does he define a Niemeyer building? 'I believe that architecture is invention,' comes the reply, delivered with a hard stare that could curdle milk at 20 paces. Niemeyer may not speak

**Left** Oscar Niemeyer in his office overlooking Copacabana beach in Rio de Janeiro. **Above** Niemeyer's Museum of Contemporary Art, across Guanabara Bay from Rio, which opened in 1996

English, but the translator leaves me in no doubt. 'I believe architecture has to be different. It has to create surprises. And that is what we are concerned with. We seek to find a new shape that can elicit awe, interest in architecture.'

You could be forgiven for assuming that at his age Niemeyer doesn't contribute much to his projects. But he is still intensely involved. He has dozens of new buildings on the go all over the globe, and he is overseeing several that are in their final phases of completion. Moreover, Niemeyer has confidently announced that he will be going to Spain this year to check on progress on a new project in Asturias, but bearing in mind his fear of flying, it is anybody's guess as to whether he will make it. 'I'm working on projects in Spain, Germany, Italy and France, so I'm very busy. I work all day long,' he says.

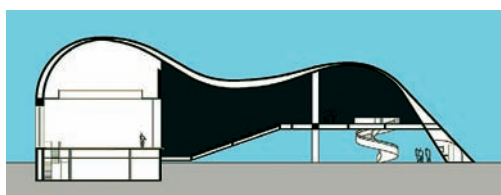
The architect is a true Brazilian mix. Born Oscar Ribeiro de Almeida de Niemeyer Soares in 1907, his ethnic roots are diverse. Ribeiro and Soares are Portuguese names, Almeida is Arabic and Niemeyer is German. He was brought up in a big house in Rio de Janeiro overflowing with family members including his parents, his five siblings, uncle and aunts, grandparents and a cousin. It was where, at the age of 21, he married his wife, Annita. Despite his grandfather holding major positions in the government (attorney general and minister of the supreme court), Niemeyer is proud that his forebear died poor. He has said he was an example to him as he was such an honest man.

Niemeyer's career has had as many undulations as his buildings. The architect of the country's new capital, Brasília, in the 1950s, he went into self-imposed exile during Brazil's military dictatorship in the 1960s, not returning until 1982. Although he shared the prestigious Pritzker prize for architecture in 1988, his concrete constructions are still a subject of controversy and debate.

After studying architecture for five years at the National School of Fine Arts in Rio de Janeiro, Niemeyer started his career in the mid-1930s, working with Lúcio Costa, Brazil's most eminent architect of the era and a fan of Le Corbusier. Brazil was looking to create its own post-colonial identity and the Modernist movement provided the perfect vehicle for change. The first project of this new-world architecture, the Ministry of Education and Public Health building in Rio, was begun in 1936, and Costa invited Le Corbusier to act as consultant. A team of young Brazilian architects collaborated, including the already noticeably talented Niemeyer, significantly amending the sketches. However, it was Le Corbusier who got the credit when the project was finally completed in 1944. The building marked the beginning of a lasting trend in Brazil of Modernist architecture being patronised by the government. It also used the relatively new technique of reinforced concrete that Niemeyer would make his own.

It was in 1943 that Niemeyer completed what remains his favourite project, the Pampulha complex in Belo Horizonte. 'It was my first project as an architect and marked the beginning of the light, different style of architecture I've sought to develop,' he says. 'It was, to say the least, the beginning of the freer style of architecture I produce.'

This 'freer style', his sinuous way of creating, first bubbled up in 1940 when the mayor of Belo Horizonte, Juscelino Kubitschek (who would later become the president of Brazil), asked Niemeyer to create a new suburb for the town, including a casino, yacht club, dance-hall and a church,



**Above** Casa das Canoas, the house in southern Brazil that Niemeyer designed in 1952 for himself and his family.

**Left and below** the planning and construction phases of the National Theatre, which opened last month and which will form part of a complex of cultural buildings at Niterói



## WHERE NIEMEYER FOUND HIS URGE TO CURVE IS FAMOUSLY ATTRIBUTED TO HIS FONDNESS FOR THE UNDULATIONS OF THE FEMALE BODY

St Francis of Assisi. The latter's groundbreaking rippling form and interior decoration shocked and offended the church authorities, who refused to consecrate it until 1959. The whole effect is understated, sleek elegance with a touch of Latin flamboyance. It is now seen as one of Niemeyer's most significant and lovely antidotes to functionalism.

Where Niemeyer found his urge to curve is famously attributed to his fondness for the undulations of the female body. In his memoirs, *The Curve of Time* (2000), Niemeyer talks about a nocturnal jaunt to a bar in Porto Alegre where, as

he puts it, 'The girls were all shapely and pretty; they had the baroque buttocks that we favoured.'

His propositions were frequently an engineer's nightmare. Niemeyer's arching magnificence is notorious for its need of restoration as it is prone to chronic cracks. What kind of a reaction does he get from his engineers, don't they complain his work is difficult to realise? 'That's true,' he concedes, 'but engineers are progressive. They're like me, they want to explore all the possibilities of construction methods.'

It is interesting to see what he built for himself and his family. His former private residence in southern Brazil was designed in 1952 as a sophisticated Modernist bijou. Casa das Canoas is one of his works most loved by experts and punters alike. Tucked away in a magical setting of tropical rainforest, it is complete with a characteristic Niemeyer sinuous roof and glass frontage, draped

by a curvy frothing pool. Long and low, it is completely integrated into its environment, wedged into a cosy hollow on the side of the hill where a vast rock cascades into the living area from the pool outside. Large windows, many of which are full length, surround the entire ground floor, flooding the open-plan living area with a cool, green sheen of tropical vegetation. A simple concrete terrace swoops round the house to the back, revealing a view of the sea between more luscious foliage. Downstairs, there is a small study and cloakroom and three simple bedrooms each with a 3D window that juts into the verdure. Parquet floors and curving dark-wood shiny panelling give a luxurious backdrop to designer items of furniture that mingle with sculptures. Today, the architect lives in a regular Ipanema flat.

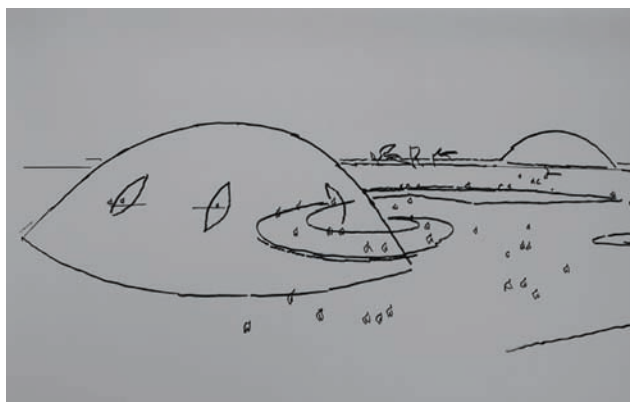
Whatever the alleged practical drawbacks to Niemeyer's visionary concepts, it is his buildings that continue to form the landmarks of Brasília, its environs and Rio. His National Museum and Library complex – which he designed, along with many of the new capital's government buildings, for Juscelino Kubitschek's government in the late 1950s – is on course finally to open this autumn. The buildings form the first section on the south side of the original cultural centre that was never built and are now being completed according to the original designs.

'Whether it opens a few days late really doesn't matter – we've been waiting 45 years for this, so one or two more days isn't a problem,' Pedro Borio, the federal district culture secretary, says wearily. 'Niemeyer said that Brasília would not be complete until the National Museum and National Library are finished.' The cupola-shaped museum reflects the National Congress's Senate building (a form like a half-melon face-down) while the library's long, low rectangular structure mirrors the National Congress base, visible on the horizon along the Esplanada dos Ministérios. There are plans in place to honour the architect at Brasília's Architectural Biennale (November 11-26), which will be held in the National Museum, an exhibition which is due to go international.

The reasons for the seemingly endless delay in completing the original visionary scheme for Brasília's cultural buildings are many and various. Lack of political will to invest in them while 'there were other more pressing priorities' is one explanation put forward. Under the military regime, although a military HQ was built, the arts side was overlooked. Then sheer inertia took hold.

Across Rio's Guanabara Bay at Niterói, another of Niemeyer's constructions is due to open this year. Dizzy from the success of the architect's Museum of Contemporary Art (MAC), which opened in 1996, Niterói's city hall has enthusiastically commissioned a whole swath of further cultural buildings that will form part of his celebrated Niemeyer Walk. The theatre, complete with wavy roof wrapping a yellow tiled front elevation, stamped with Niemeyer's trademark sketches, was opened officially last month. The Movie Centre, also a feature of the promenade, may still be only a skeleton but has its funding secured.

There is yet more Niemeyer destined for Brasília, where another section in the original pilot plan intended for its cultural centre may come to life on the north side of the central avenue. Provided that finance can be raised from within the private sector, it will include cinemas, cafes, restaurants, shops and a stadium for pop concerts. The architect has all the designs drafted and ready, including a big



**Above** inside the National Museum in Brasília, which Niemeyer designed in the 1950s – along with the new capital's other public buildings – but which is only now ready to open, half a century later. **Left** and **below** the National Congress's Senate building



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ball of a building that will possibly be a 180-degree cinema or planetarium. His new Supreme Labour Court building opened in the spring, while further imminent Niemeyer creations include a museum and research centre and a national school/concert hall. As if this isn't enough a Sambódromo (a 'sambadrome') is in planning for Brasília's annual carnival in the city's biggest satellite town, Ceilândia.

The MAC's wow-factor has made it one of Rio's tourist shrines. However, the consensus is that the building overshadows the art. And that has been Niemeyer's trademark – taking design risks

to the point that his work is sometimes criticised as abstract sculpture, unrelated to its environment. This triumph of form over functionality has attracted criticism for decades. When I ask him what he considers to be the most important element in architecture, Niemeyer replies, 'Architectural astonishment.'

Roberto Segre, a professor at Rio's Federal University School of Architecture, questions the functional success of MAC. 'The main exhibition area is surrounded by windows, making it difficult to display paintings because the sunlight has a blinding effect. The second floor space is too dark for important exhibitions and its very big beams also disrupt viewing, although they're necessary to support the building's light, flower-like image. The design also didn't factor in any storage space for the permanent collection, the reason the museum was built in the first place. But all this is not important



compared to its meaning as an iconic Niemeyer sculpture overlooking Guanabara Bay.'

It is not only national schemes that are in the pipeline. Among current European projects are: a sculpture in Le Havre, France; a cultural centre in Aviles, Spain; and a concert hall in Ravello, Italy. In discussion is an aquatic park in Potsdam, Germany, where Niemeyer can indulge his sensuous affections with a cluster of domes housing an aqua-lounge, wave pool, children's play pool, sauna, fitness centre and eight-lane sport pool.

Bearing in mind the sheer quantity of major building projects Niemeyer has had to churn out over the years, how did he cope with the pressures from his work? Did he ever take it out on his wife and family? 'Naturally,' he replies with disarming honesty. However, the Niemeyer practice is now virtually a family collective and echoes the character of the household he grew up in. Although Niemeyer's wife, Annita, died in 2004, he is still closely surrounded by five generations of Niemeyers. With one daughter, five grandchildren, 13 great-grandchildren and six great-great-grandchildren, his family life now merges with his working life. His granddaughter Ana Lúcia is the director of the Niemeyer Foundation, while another granddaughter, Ana Elisa, works as an architect at his head office alongside nine other architects. Great-grandsons Carlos Henrique (a qualified architect) and Paulo (an architecture student) are based with him at his Copacabana studio. His nephew João Niemeyer is also an architect in the office, while his grandson Carlos Eduardo is in charge of photography and exhibitions. His daughter, Anna Maria, was assigned to control family expenses which had got out of hand. 'She was shocked when she saw the

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**Top** the National Library. **Above left** a detail of the interior of Brasília's cathedral. **Above** the casino, part of the Pampulha complex in Belo Horizonte, Niemeyer's favourite project

numbers,' he wrote in his memoirs. 'She said, "Dad, just stop helping everybody."'

It is often thought that, with such an impressive portfolio, he must be a rich man. But *The Curve of Time* put a different perspective on the matter. 'Of course there were good times but there were hard times, too.' During his self-imposed exile in Paris, he would sit at the cafe La Coupole making a demitasse of coffee last for hours, worrying about his finances. He has commented that he 'did all the splendid buildings for the capital on the miserly salary of a civil servant'. Maybe it shouldn't worry him too much because he is on record as stating, 'I have never been much concerned with money. I once said in an interview that I would be ashamed to be rich.'

His two decades of exile are remembered as keenly today as if they happened yesterday. With political pressure affecting his work, and following interrogation by the dictatorship, he settled in Paris in 1967. He kept himself busy, creating the French Communist Party HQ, the Montadori building in Milan, the University of Constantine in Algeria, a cultural centre in Le Havre, and the FATA Office building in Turin. He kept company with leading intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre, who admired

his architecture (the writer once asked him to join a demo; Niemeyer refused), and André Malraux. 'I'm still outraged when I think back on the time I lived abroad, knowing my Brazilian brothers were being persecuted by the military government,' he says. 'I was pleased to find solidarity in every country I visited, including your country.'

A member of Brazil's Communist party since 1945, Niemeyer left the PCB in the 1990s but has remained an ideological supporter. 'I have no complaints about what's happened in my life over the last five years, but it disturbs me to see the miserable poverty and despair of our poorer brothers,' he tells me. Niemeyer is a friend of Fidel Castro, as he was with the Brazilian Communist leader, Luís Carlos Prestes, who was known as the 'paladin of hope'. Today he has a photograph of Prestes on his studio wall next to one of his sketches – a hand holding a single flower above which arcs a neatly written epigram: 'For a better world.'

It seems as if the answer to what has been Niemeyer's biggest life lesson is in the writing on the walls. His studio is decorated with sturdy dictums rippling around in beautiful, orderly Matisse-style handwriting for all to see: 'Architecture isn't the most important thing. What matters most are life, friends and this unjust world, which we must change' and 'The f\*\*\*ed haven't a chance'. So what does he think of the world in 2006? 'Unfortunately I have nothing good to say about this climate of violence and disrespect for human beings that the Bush empire has created.'

Niemeyer's political leanings have dictated his almost exclusive involvement in designing public buildings. Unlike Brasília, which was designed for cars, not pedestrians, the Niemeyer Walk will be very walkable. Promenaders of every social class will be able to enjoy ambling the 1km stretch along the seafront where the theatre, two cathedrals, memorial-museum, Oscar Niemeyer Foundation and a film theatre complex will line the route which ends at the MAC. It has an already completed and suitably space-age ferry terminal (also a Niemeyer creation) further along the bay.

Among the rumours of work in Moscow and a commission for a private home somewhere in Denmark or Norway, it is noticeable that the UK hasn't yet hit the Niemeyer radar. In 1972 he was invited by Oxford University to submit a design for a student hall of residence, which never made it off the sketch pad; a Brighton hotel went the same way in the late 1990s; 2003 finally saw his British architectural debut, in the shape of a pavilion for the Serpentine Gallery, a temporary structure.

Wherever he works, audacity is a word never very far from his buildings. 'I remember what it was like to design the plaza for Le Havre,' he says. 'They invited me to go, and I went there with the mayor. It was a huge plaza, and I could see that it was facing the sea. And Le Havre is very cold, with sea wind. So I told him that I'd like to build the plaza four metres underground. He was aghast because it would involve cutting into the ground to make a lowered plaza to protect it. But he did it. You can walk on the pavement and can see the plaza down below. I was very pleased because it is the only plaza in the world that is built like that.' And it was in 1973.

On this triumphalist note, my interview ends. Like a true gentleman, he stands up to say goodbye and I take his hand and thank him. As I turn to leave he looks at me silently. His face slowly dissolves into the very slightest smile. There's a lot more life in the Latin Creator yet. ■