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The Vertical Gardens of Roberto Burle Marx: an Artistic Expression

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This paper aims to explore the vertical gardens designed by Roberto Burle Marx as an artistic expression of a common design feature, prevalent in landscape architectural discourse and practice since the 1930s. The contribution of Marx to the art of landscape design is his invention of an artistic, unnatural interpretation of the traditional concept of the vertical garden. Throughout his career, he experimented with innovative artistic ways and unique aesthetic vocabulary in his design schemes.

An early concept of Marx's vertical gardens is that of the murals of azulejos, rectilinear or curving walls covered with polychromatic ceramic tiles. He used them as freestanding wall elements associated either with a reflecting pool or vegetation to create sensual contrasts. They provide a foreground boundary asserting Marx's ability to work out spatial arrangement beyond the layout of the ground plan as seen in the Walter Morreira Salles House (1951) and the Barra Shopping Business Center (1981). In other instances, massive walls become vertical gardens expressed through a variety of spatial arrangements, configuration of varying shapes, details and colors, water, plants and hard materials as seen in the vertical gardens of the Hospital Souza Aguiar (1966), the Rio Business Center (1981), the Safra Bank Headquarters (1982), and the Parque Cultural Paulista (1986). In later years, the water element became a major constant feature and one can notice the treatment of gigantic stone walls in complex volumetric compositions and rigorous geometry of lines and forms to act as vertical walls with groundcover plants intersecting within them. Conceived in 1979 and completed in 1990, the Vargem Grande Fazenda garden exemplifies this approach. Similar arrangements may also be encountered in the Raul de Souza Martins Residence (1983) and the Odette Monteiro Garden (1988). In later years, Marx developed a number of vertical gardens that form interlocking spatial compositions such as the Sitio Santo Antonio da Bica where two highly patterned panels set up a dialogue between themselves, the rectilinear pool, and the nearby pergola. The main garden panel separates the water garden from the driveway and is an abstract situ assemblage of advancing and receding planes of large blocks of granite reclaimed from demolished Colonial mansions in Rio whereas the other one is a stone water garden. This composite arrangement form a terrace which can be viewed from the deep shaded veranda of the house and seems to epitomize Marx's constant search for an interlocking fusion between architecture and landscape. A similar approach may be found in the Parque Burle Marx (1950, 1991). Finally, another innovative concept of vertical gardens is that of black steel columns and coconut bark, xaxims, covered with bromeliads or philodendrons. These living structures represent Marx's understanding of the importance of the vertical dimension combined with cultural identity, native tropical plant physiology and sculptural qualities. They often punctuate the ground paved surfaces of the gardens or the water surfaces and are engaged into a dialogue with the typical vertical panels, as exemplified in the case of the roof top garden at the Safra Bank Headquarters in 1982. The xaxim columns are used in many urban gardens in the 1980's such as the Xerox Brazil Building, Rio de Janeiro (1982), the Raul de Souza Martins Residence (1983), the Marina Barre Clube garden (1983), the National Economic and Social Development Bank (1985) and the Sitio Santo Antonio da Bica (1994). In conclusion, the vertical gardens of Roberto Burle Marx began as artistic explorations introduced into the modern Brazilian landscape. They are composite abstract constructions, usually of high patterned relief, either as a result of carving a flat surface or of assembling distinct parts, positioned in a way to define edges and boundaries of spatial arrangements, and are constructed of hard local material such as moulded concrete, roughcast concrete, granite blocks, stone, tiles, wood and the discarded fragments of old buildings along with earth and plants mostly bromeliads, epiphytes and parasites. They are conceived as highly artefact elements of the garden, immersive sculptures in space. They represent the first modern conception of vertical gardens regarded as an artistic version to the level of an enduring ecological art creation of the modern image of Brazil worthy to be documented, analyzed and preserved.



1. The curving mural of azulejos in the Walter Morreira Salles House, Rio de Janeiro, 1951 (source: Julia Georgi)



2. Xaxim column, sophisticated metal structure erected in the Marina Barre Clube garden, Rio de Janeiro, 1983 (source: Julia Georgi)