



Starchitecture of an Earlier Era: Niemeyer's Fair in Tripoli, Lebanon

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The Tripoli International and Permanent Exhibition was an ambitious undertaking by the Lebanese government in the optimistic years of the early 1960s. Oscar Niemeyer, newly famous for his designs for Brasilia, was chosen as the master architect for this project covering dozens of hectares at the edge of Tripoli. Such a large-scale urban intervention was not unique in developing countries in the postwar years, ranging from entire new cities like Chandigarh to massive projects like Rio's Sambodromo. For a number of historical reasons, the Tripoli Fair failed thoroughly as a fair, but it completely transformed Tripoli's urbanized space. Just as the original proposal for the Fair had sought to revitalize this dormant, formerly important city and to give it a new identity, a series of attempts at reviving the Fair itself or at giving it a new function have been made over the years.

There are several compelling reasons to look back at the history of Niemeyer's original Tripoli fair. First, while other fairs and similar ambitious projects have generally been much altered relative to their initial design, the original concept here was substantially implemented and the project is unusually well preserved, hence acquiring historical significance. Second, this project involved hiring a known architect from an emerging country to create a signature large-scale project in another emerging country, an unusual decision at the time. Third, the potential success of any future projects for the exposition grounds will hinge on understanding the history of the original fair and the challenges it has faced over the years.

This paper is based on collaborative research involving the two authors and two other researchers in Lebanon, based on archival research and a number of recent interviews of the participants in the creation of this project, including Oscar Niemeyer. The presentation will start by identifying the local origins of and objectives for the 1962 project. The basic conceptions and intentions of the architecture as an urban intervention and a new type of fair are analyzed next. This leads to examining the implementation of the fair: why it was never fully completed, yet how the built part did survive as an intervention remarkably frozen in time. Finally, we consider the fair's recent history, with a series of proposals for the site over the last few years, and how these were intended to renew both the exposition and the city. Questions on the future of the Tripoli Fair thus crystallize issues related to the conservation of aging futuristic urban interventions.

KEY WORDS: International Fair, Tripoli, Lebanon, modern architecture, Oscar Niemeyer.