Paulista Avenue is one of the most important urban symbols of metropolitan São Paulo, extending for almost three kilometers over the crest between the city’s two major river valleys. Midway along the avenue is Trianon Terrace, the plaza under the wide-spanning elevated concrete structure of the Museum of Art of São Paulo (MASP). Italian-Brazilian architect Lina Bo Bardi redesigned this plaza as part of her project for the museum between 1957 and 1968. By recreating the open space and city outlook that had existed since the development of the avenue, Bardi embraced the historical tradition of Trianon Terrace as a collective place for social encounter.

The genealogy of Trianon Terrace as an urban collective space overlaps with the history of transformation of Paulista Avenue and the city’s development as a whole. The terrace, one for the most significant collective public spaces in São Paulo, has been continuously reconstituted by formal and informal uses and cultural and political practices that reveal different conceptions of urban life. It offers an emblematic example of how urban spaces are related to the exercise of democracy, the redefinition of cultural recognition and the role of citizenship in contemporary societies.
An Affluent History

São Paulo was a small town until the 1870s, when it became the economic center for the growing coffee trade in Brazil, situated between the plantations in the hinterland and the Port of Santos. Its population grew several times, reaching over 570,000 inhabitants by the end of the 1920s. The city attracted immigrants and international capital, which spurred industrialization and led to São Paulo becoming the national financial and commercial leader. New urban developments included both working-class neighborhoods as well as luxury districts such as Paulista Avenue, created in 1891 by developer and agronomist Joaquim Eugênio de Lima.

Twenty years after the opening of the avenue, it became the main thoroughfare in the most affluent neighborhood of São Paulo, a boulevard lined with large villas built in different architectural styles. In 1911, the city commissioned prominent architect Ramos de Azevedo to design an underground restaurant and ballroom covered by a public plaza, which was named Trianon Terrace. The project occupied a strategic site with a wide outlook sloping down toward the valley leading to the historic center of São Paulo. This privileged topographic situation in the middle of Paulista Avenue had been reserved as a green area and the vista preserved by a city ordinance dating back to the development of the avenue. The whole structure was conceived as a terraced building semi-buried into the site to allow for uses and access at different levels. The terrace gained new life when British landscape architect Barry Parker redesigned the surrounding area and created a wooded park across the street in 1918.

Economic Collapse and Political Demonstrations

For over twenty years, until the Great Depression affected the capitalist world, the park and terrace complex were among the main public spaces for the staging of the social, cultural and political life of the agricultural and commercial elites of São Paulo. The Wall Street Crash of 1929 caused dire problems for the Brazilian coffee monoculture. This event reverberated in São Paulo’s economy, deeply altering the social life of the city. Many of the families that resided along Paulista Avenue lost their fortunes and had to sell their properties to an emerging group of traders and industrialists that grew in the shadow of the coffee market.

In the beginning of the 1930s, the avenue became a strategic place for political demonstrations, particularly those associated with the Constitutional Revolution of 1932, the separatist movement that opposed Getúlio Vargas’s coup against the election of a São Paulo native candidate, Júlio Prestes, and proposed the secession of the state from the rest of the country. This was the largest military conflict in Brazil in the twentieth century, resulting in physical destruction to the city and several casualties. The uprisings lasted three months until federal troops interrupted them, guaranteeing Vargas’s place in power and paving the way for what turned into his dictatorship that lasted from 1937 to 1945.

Cultural Rebirth

With the end of Vargas’s repressive government, Brazil entered a period of democratization that lasted until 1964, yielding to the internationalization of the country’s economy. President Juscelino Kubitschek was responsible for an intensive nation-building and modernization plan during his mandate (1955-1960), facilitating the booming growth of São Paulo as a leading industrial and cultural center. Paulista Avenue became the favored place for the creation of a business district for national and foreign companies, and many banks, some new and some relocated from the historic city center, settled there.

The original Trianon Terrace, containing the ballroom and restaurant built in the 1910s, did not survive the intense urban modernization and social transformation of the avenue.
Street lanes and sidewalks were widened and the old ballroom was demolished by the city in 1951. The site remained vacant for several years and was disputed by different groups who wanted to develop it for cultural purposes. An affluent group related to the arts, the Mattarazzo family, had unsuccessfully tried to gain control of the site for the construction of a pavilion for the Biennial Foundation in the early 1950s. Their contender magnate Assis Chateaubriand, who owned Empresas e Diários Associados (Associate Press Corporation), the largest press conglomerate in the country, used his power in the press to work out a political deal with the city and state governments to obtain permission to build MASP on the strategic lot. Finally, in 1957, the administrators of the museum succeeded in transferring the museum from its temporary downtown facilities into a permanent building along Paulista Avenue. The Italian journalist and art dealer Pietro Maria Bardi, museum director from its creation in 1947, was invited by Chateaubriand to conceive of an art museum that would project him and the city onto the international stage. Architect Lina Bo Bardi, the museum director’s wife, was closely involved with the project.

The museum location is witness to the political skills of Chateaubriand and the Bardi’s. Lina Bo Bardi suggested using the site on Paulista Avenue after studying other possibilities around the city, proposing a striking project that returned the public space of Trianon Terrace to the city. The use of the terrace as the mediation between the activities promoted by MASP and the city was one of the major innovations of Bardi’s design. The whole ensemble is separated into three parts: a semi-buried block with public facilities; the urban terrace framed by the building; and the museum lifted from the ground. The elevated volume responds to the zoning restriction requiring that the view from the site remain completely open to the city. The terrace is commonly known as the “Span of MASP” among São Paulo residents, claiming a unique overlap between architecture and city, and between place and history.
Lina Bo Bardi’s project created a prominent landmark and offered a new public space to the city, which worked in tandem with the cultural purpose of the museum. With strong references to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s Crown Hall, Bardi’s proposal integrated the previous typology of Trianon Terrace, shaping the base of the museum as a semi-buried block containing auditoria, library, exhibition halls and a restaurant, and the transparent block with the permanent collection hanging from the two long pre-stressed concrete piers. This unusual form defined a new image and a new space of collective reference in the city and helped project the image of the museum and the city abroad.

The long design and construction process coincided with radical changes to the political life of the country. The process started during a time of great economic and cultural optimism in the 1950s and ended with the museum’s official inauguration in 1969, the year that marked the beginning of the harshest period of the military regime, established with the coup of 1964 and not ending until 1989. The democratic ideal that motivated the creation of the museum spaces was at odds with the political practices that followed its opening. Lina Bo Bardi referred to the terrace as a space of freedom in reaction to the censorship imposed during the military regime. The presence of the museum in the city was a significant reminder of the values missing in the public sphere during that period.

**Once More, a Stage for Dissent**

After the new museum opened in 1968, Trianon Terrace became a highly visible place and a strong political reference to the citizens of São Paulo. It also became an important iconic space and a player in the country’s social and political processes. The cultural and artistic activities promoted by the museum in the 1970s, such as exhibitions, concerts, cinema, conferences and art history programs, attracted growing audiences. Still, those activities were often submitted to censorship mechanisms lasting until the repressive regime started its gradual demise in the 1980s.

The end of the military government left behind a profound economic and social crisis in the
country and in the city, affecting Paulista Avenue and the museum in different ways. Trianon Terrace soon became an important forum of demonstration and political dissent. Traditional public uses of the open spaces of Paulista Avenue gradually gave way to protests against the military regime, such as the widespread movements for direct presidential elections, Diretas Já, in 1984.

Since that time, the museum terrace and Paulista Avenue have become one of the main stages for dissent in the public and political life of the city, especially in the early 1990s. The city, in agreement with the museum administration, rented out the terrace for several shows and fairs. The population of São Paulo also started to use the plaza as a departure point for political demonstrations.

**Private Impasse, Public Reinvention**

In the last decade, open collective spaces in São Paulo have become increasingly defensive and privatized, with surveillance systems and private security guards. Although Paulista Avenue remains a unique place of social diversity in the city—actors ranging from street vendors to business people to soccer celebrities to political demonstrators all use the space—it has been reshaped to respond to local metropolitan developments and struggles to establish an image with international, and now global, appeal.

As part of this, the museum’s role has undergone significant transformations. After Lina Bo Bardi passed away and Pietro Maria Bardi resigned as museum director in the early 1990s, the new museum administration proposed drastic changes to the building’s spatial layout and privatized and restricted access to certain activities and areas of the museum. Under the guide of not wanting to risk overload on the concrete structure that sustains the terrace, the museum administration prohibited its use by large audiences. This coincided with attempts by local CEOs to legally control mass political and cultural events on Paulista Avenue.
Despite the layout changes and restrictions on public use, the museum and the terrace underneath it have not lost their symbolic place in the social imaginary of São Paulo. On the contrary, the convergence between MASP and the avenue still enjoys a privileged position without equivalent in the urban life of the metropolis. It continues to be the primary urban reference for different social groups claiming cultural recognition and political dissent.

The open space Lina Bo Bardi incorporated in her design for the MASP is a good example of how designers imagine and represent collective spaces, and how they are socially produced, confirmed or rejected by different social groups. Despite a century of transformations, this urban void continues to be reinvented and reclaimed, remaining one of the extraordinary symbolic venues of public life in São Paulo.

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LEFT: Meeting point for the Gay Pride Parade along Paulista Avenue in 2003.