

Lina & Gio: the last humanists

Display 1, The last humanists

During the years of 1940 and 1945, the architects Gio Ponti (1891-1979) and Lina Bo Bardi (1914-1992) worked together in a series of projects in Milan, Italy.

By that time, Gio Ponti was already a mature and an internationally celebrated designer, known for his editorial contribution in the renowned magazine *Domus*, for his work at the Decorative Arts Milan Triennials, and for his achievements as a prolific architect and product designer. Lina Bo Bardi was a young woman, just graduated from the College of Architecture at Rome University (in 1939), who had decided to move to Milan to escape the traditional and reactionary atmosphere of the Roman architectural environment. After her years in Milan, Bardi would move permanently to Brazil, and would become one of its most prominent architects.

The collaboration between Ponti and Bardi is a controversial matter. She claims she worked in his practice from '8 in the morning until midnight, including Saturdays and Sundays', and that Ponti said, right when he hired her: 'I'm not going to pay you, you have to pay me' (implying she had a lot to learn from him). Other sources (including Ponti's daughter and biographer Lisa Ponti, and Carlo Pagani, a long-term assistant and collaborator of Ponti, and a close friend of Bardi) argue that Bardi never really worked in Ponti's practice. Instead, she would have contributed to his editorial and architectural work as a freelancer, working from the studio she shared with Pagani at Via Gesù 12.

In her autobiographical text 'Currículo Literário', Bardi pays tribute to the lessons she learnt from Ponti, whom she defines as the 'last of the humanists' – for his commitment to the social and cultural agenda of architecture, his interest in traditional forms of craft and his all-encompassing approach to design, 'from cups and chairs to fashion, including also urban design, curatorial and editorial work'.

The term 'humanism' describes an ideology that understands humans as a 'source of infinite possibilities', aiming for a 'balance of physical, spiritual, moral and intellectual faculties'. Humanism draws on the belief that human dignity should be of primary importance, regardless of race, class or other differences. It draws on a knowledge of the past as a means to continuously (re)construct human histories and mythologies. A humanist will typically perform in a wide range of cultural disciplines, from micro to macro, from ideas to artefacts, from objects to places.

As Bardi pointed out, Ponti's oeuvre resonates with the principles of humanism on many levels. Like him, she would, in her later work in Brazil, commit herself fully to the promotion of humanist values. Similarly to Ponti, Bardi placed emphasis on the social and cultural aspects of architecture, stretching her design activities from the making of garments to the design of masterplans. Perhaps most importantly, Bardi taught Brazilians to appreciate the value of their popular, vernacular legacy, which had until then been deemed worthless in relation to its European counterpart.