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Ibirapuera Auditorium

The labareda ("flame" in Portuguese) juts out over the main entrance like an extended fiery tongue. (Daniel Allen)



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From the elevated rooftop of São Paulo's [Unique Hotel](#), the city is a sea of identikit apartment buildings, office blocks and single storey villas. Seen from afar, the hard-edged urban sprawl appears haphazard and devoid of creative flair. It is an underwhelming landscape that compares poorly with the more sensual architecture of Rio de Janeiro, about 430km to the north.

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Yet those who look a little closer will find that São Paulo's contemporary architectural charms are actually a joy to behold. At the start of the 20th Century, this city was home to a mere 239,000 inhabitants – it now houses more than 11 million. Despite the whirlwind urban growth, and in many ways because of it, the São Paulo of recent decades has become a hotbed of talented Brazilian architects, including Ruy Ohtake and Paulo Mendes da Rocha. It is their cutting edge structures that now define the city's landscape and enhance residential life.

"After Brasília was made the Brazilian capital in 1960, São Paulo became an architectural desert," explained Eliana Souza, an architectural enthusiast and founder of [SPin Brazil Tours](#). "Buildings were constructed with little thought to their design, to how they fitted into neighbourhoods. Rapid development destroyed the soul of the old city. It was out of this barren environment that the [Paulista School of Architecture](#) was born. The Paulista architects wanted to build for the people. The chunkier concrete forms of their buildings mixed with the curvilinear buildings of Oscar Niemeyer, and gradually this helped to improve how the city looked and worked."

Oscar Niemeyer, the doyen of Brazilian contemporary architecture, may be more famously connected with the architecture of Brasília, but his imprint can also be seen in São Paulo. Together with the nearby [Museu de Arte Moderna](#) by the legendary Paulista architect Lina Bo Bardi, Niemeyer's striking [Ibirapuera Auditorium](#) embodies São Paulo's love of

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modern architecture and the avant garde.

Belatedly completed in 2005, the auditorium is part of a group of buildings inside [Ibirapuera Park](#) that all belong to a 1950s Niemeyer masterplan. Today the park has become São Paulo's equivalent of [New York's Central Park](#), a green focal point where residents can relax, exercise and commune with friends, all while enjoying architecture by two of Brazil's finest creative minds.

The auditorium's most dramatic exterior feature is a sinuous awning of crimson painted metal – known officially as the *labareda* ("flame" in Portuguese) – which juts out over the main entrance like an extended fiery tongue. The building's beautifully simplistic trapezoidal structure comes to life at night when the unblemished white exterior is illuminated by banks of floodlights. A wide back door opens to an interior stage, allowing for al fresco summer concerts.

Inside the auditorium, red and white is also the dominant colour theme. An imposing, organic sculpture by Japanese-Brazilian artist Tomie Ohtake winds around much of the wall and ceiling of the foyer, its deep red lines accentuating the foyer's curved white staircase. The auditorium also features art by Tomie and graphic artist Luis Antônio Vallandro Keating.

More work by Tomie can be viewed at the [Instituto Tomie Ohtake](#) in Sao Paulo's Pinheiros neighbourhood. Dedicated to showcasing her work, the institute occupies the first two floors of a wildly flamboyant office tower designed by her son Ruy Ohtake, a Niemeyer protégé and one of São Paulo's leading architects. The curving metallic magenta and violet façade is particularly eye-catching, while basement restaurant [Santinho](#) is well worth checking out for its Brazilian cuisine, with typically *paulistano* dashes of Italian, Japanese and Arab.

Sitting directly opposite the Ibirapuera Auditorium is another futuristic Niemeyer building that perfectly complements its more recently constructed twin. Completed in 1951, and built to commemorate São Paulo's 400th anniversary, the [Pavilhão Lucas Nogueira Garcez](#) is more popularly known by locals as *Oca* (Indian for "house"). While this exhibition space is said to resemble a traditional Native American dwelling, there is more than a touch of the extraterrestrial to its flattened dome shape and large circular windows.

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Fans of Niemeyer's work should also be sure to take in the **Edifício Copan**, a 140m-high, 38-story residential building completed in 1966 in Sao Paulo's *República* neighbourhood. Home to 5,000 people and more than 70 shops, this serpentine, monolithic structure is one of the largest buildings in Brazil, and has the largest floor area – 116,152sqm – of any residential building in the world. It is so big it even has its own post code.

Close to the Edifício Copan, in the Pompeia neighbourhood, is another of São Paulo's architectural institutions – the **SESC Pompéia**. This former steel drum factory was converted into a complex for community activities and events between 1977 and 1986, following a blueprint by Brazil's most celebrated female architect, Lina Bo Bardi.

"The overarching theme behind the SESC Pompéia development was about creating spaces for the people of São Paulo," Souza said. "It really changed the way the people of the city viewed old industrial buildings and disused industrial sites, many more of which have subsequently been developed."

During its conversion, SESC Pompéia's old brick sheds were transformed into exhibition spaces, a library, an excellent cafeteria and a series of workshop spaces – the latter are filled daily with pensioners and youngsters learning skills such as carpentry and photography. The wooden boardwalks and alleyways between buildings are packed with mothers and children, locals and tourists.

Bo Bardi also designed two new concrete buildings that are connected to the renovated factory by a succession of linear footbridges and illuminated by distinctive, irregularly shaped windows with red grills. These buildings contain sports facilities like football fields, a swimming pool and a solarium.

Bo Bardi was also responsible for another of São Paulo's landmark buildings – the city's iconic **Museu de Arte de São Paulo**, completed in 1968 in the city's Bela Vista neighbourhood. This suspended box, constructed in concrete and glass, sits on two u-shaped red columns and stores collections ranging from the gothic to the abstract. The place is still hugely popular with the city's residents and regularly features concerts in the space underneath the structure.

Perhaps the Hotel Unique itself best embodies the brave world of São Paulo architecture. Shaped like a giant slice of watermelon, with a porthole-studded copper façade, this extravagant, post-modern landmark in the heart of the city's upscale Jardins neighbourhood was also designed by Ruy. Looking forward, it is architects such as he, inspired by the likes of Niemeyer and Bo Bardi, who will further shape this great Brazilian city.

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