

São Paulo

by Claire Rigby Photography by Cássio Vasconcellos



The birth of a new generation
of cultural institutions



facing page Casa do Povo
above Edifício Copan



Phosphorus



Casa do Povo



Teatro da Vertigem, *Bom Retiro 958 Metros*, 2012–13, play performed at Casa do Povo. Photo: Flávio Portela



Opening of the exhibition *Oásis*, 2013, organised by Hercules Martins, Casa do Povo



Opening party in June 2013 for Carmela Gross's installation *Aurora*, 2003, at Pivô



Gustavo Ferro, *Acting-Out*, 2011, performance/installation, Phosphorous



Opening of the exhibition *Oásis*, 2013, organised by Hercules Martins, Casa do Povo



Screening, part of the Laboratório de Crítica Cultural, 2013, Casa do Povo. Photo: Luíza Sigulem

There's something stirring in downtown São Paulo; indeed, there's something stirring in Brazil in general. As work on this article began in June, a sudden wave of protests swept the country, filling the streets in a seismic, cathartic calling-into-question – to boil it down to basics – of the kind of society people wish to live in. In São Paulo, many of the protests began in and radiated out from the downtown neighbourhood of Centro, an area that has been the epicentre of various creative, self-starting movements recently, both social and artistic. From street parties like VoodooHop and Carlos Capslock to a string of DIY-spirited festivals – BaixoCentro, Anhangabaú da FelizCidade, Existe Amor em SP – they are blooming here between the cracks, where the city's once-beating heart spent the end of the twentieth century sliding into dirty, dilapidated decadence.

Many of the city's major art institutions are or once were located here in SP's historic centre: the Museu de Arte Moderna (MAM) was based here until 1958, as was the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP), until it moved in 1968 to its current home, an iconic masterpiece by architect Lino Bo Bardi on the city's grand, businesslike Avenida Paulista. The Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil (CCBB) is currently considering the possibility of migrating to a new, larger home close to the MASP – but for now it still ranks among Centro's doughty institutions, along with Caixa Cultural and the grand Pinacoteca do Estado art museum.

And joining their ranks, albeit on a range of smaller scales, a new generation of São Paulo cultural institutions is currently being established in and around Centro. These plucky new spaces – Pivô, Estúdio Lâmina and Phosphorus – are making the most of the cheap rents and the quality of available premises. The veteran, rising-from-the-embers Casa do Povo is in the next-door neighbourhood of Bom Retiro. Driven forward by ambitious young cultural players, what these four have in common are their not-for-profit or nonprofit-oriented ethos, their love for Centro and its surroundings, and their locations in long-neglected but fine old downtown buildings.

"The quality of the buildings in Centro is excellent," says Baixo Ribeiro, "and the infrastructure is all in place, readymade." Best known as the cofounder of SP's leading urban-art gallery, Choque Cultural, Ribeiro, along with artists from the collective BijaRi and architects from the studio Arquitetura da Convivência, is a leading light in CoLaboratório, an urban-planning project focusing on Centro. "For many years, the area was presented as an ugly, dangerous place, or as if it was somehow abandoned," he says. "A sort of institutionalised prejudice grew up around it, but in reality Centro has always been vital, full of life and human diversity." CoLaboratório is currently mapping the area with a view to registering the rich urban culture already present there, and adding to it by encouraging artists and art-related projects into its empty properties, with an initial focus on the microregion around the Valley of Anhangabaú. The region, extending from SP's baroque Teatro Municipal on one side and up to the CCBB on the other, is a favourite spot for open-air festivals and events, and has just gained an important addition in the form of Praça das Artes: a new home for SP's music conservatory, with class and rehearsal space for

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the city ballet, two orchestras, two choirs and a string quartet. The complex – parts of which were built on land expropriated for the purpose by City Hall – consists of various modules ranging from a beautifully restored neoclassical facade to the sleek, brutalist concrete walls enclosing the new dance and orchestra headquarters.

Facing the complex from across the narrow valley is Estúdio Lâmina, occupying half a floor of a grand old building whose entrance is peppered with *pixação* – São Paulo's spiky, hieroglyphic graffiti tags. Attend a salon evening at Lâmina, and you can expect to be presented with anything from live Brazilian-flavoured bluegrass to howling performance art. "There are so many young artists who can't get a foot in the door of the art circuit," says Estúdio Lâmina's founder, Luciano CortaRuas.

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But of the new downtown art spaces, the most emblematic is undoubtedly Pivô, whose name means 'pivot'. With some 3,500sqm of floor space, the not-for-profit art and cultural centre occupies one end of the magnificent Edifício Copan, an S-shaped architectural behemoth created by the late Oscar Niemeyer, which is home to around 5,000 residents, in apartments that range from 27 to 270sqm. Pivô launched the same night as last year's São Paulo Bienal with an ambitious set of interlinked exhibitions held together under the title *Da Próxima Vez Eu Fazia Tudo Diferente (Next Time I'd Have Done It All Differently)* – which featured installations by Carmela Gross, Nazareno Rodrigues, Guilherme Peters and Paloma Bosquê, among others. Displaying an early knack for creating and working new networks – a hallmark of the people behind these new centres – Pivô has hosted shows by the SP commercial galleries Mendes Wood and Emma Thomas alongside its core programme, which includes performances, book launches and debates, and has rapidly consolidated its position as one of the city's most credible and interesting new spaces. With studios available to artists working on upcoming exhibitions, Pivô is currently in the midst of renovations to make its vast interior, which had lain empty for 20 years, more accessible. There are also plans in hand to make room for a library, together with bar or restaurant in the ground-floor space, to open early next year. "Constructing Pivô was like moving into an empty apartment," says Fernanda Brenner, the centre's cofounder and director, and an artist herself, with a background in the film industry. "You need somewhere to sit; so you buy a chair. It's like making a huge installation, dealing directly with the space and the people. We moved in and tried to realise with our bodies how everything should work."

Phosphorus, another of the city's new art endeavours, is set inside an even older historic building – and that's no mean feat in São Paulo, where knock-'em-down and build-'em-upwards has been the order of the day since the mid-twentieth century. Behind a nondescript door in a quiet street close to the huge Praça da Sé square, a flight of stairs leads up into an unexpectedly fine atrium, from which swooping wooden banisters lead up and away to the floor above. On my last visit, in June, sparsely figurative embroideries by Silvana Mello lined an upstairs corridor, including one depicting a full-blown riot in progress,

while in the main exhibition room downstairs, in a solo exhibition by Luiz Roque, two men danced and whirled euphorically in slow motion as part of an affecting piece of video art, *O Novo Monumento* (*The New Monument*, 2013). In a small internal patio, a profusion of ferns sprouted from ruined chairs in a long-term installation by the artist Rodrigo Bueno, and Phosphorus's founder Maria Montero was holding court to a trio of attentive visitors, explaining that the 1890 building once housed the city's first notary public, just paces from the Pátio do Colégio, a Jesuit church and college that marks the city's 1554 founding spot. This is São Paulo's historical ground zero.

Phosphorus, which runs an artists' residency programme as well as exhibitions, opened in late 2011, when Montero, an artist, curator and producer who was working at the upscale Luciana Brito gallery at the time, was invited to take on and share the magnificent building with Simone Pokropp, owner of a vintage clothing business. "I hadn't even thought about opening my own place," says Montero. "But Simone said to me, 'Let's take a leap into the unknown together.' I came to see the building, and I said yes."

Soon after launching the space, Montero was approached by Jaqueline Martins, a gallerist notable for her interest in 1970s artists of the likes of Alex Vallauri, Bill Lundberg and Letícia Parente. Martins proposed an exhibition, *Soma Não-Zero* (*Non-Zero Sum*) to take place at Phosphorus during SP-Arte, the city's powerhouse art fair, which was founded in 2005. It felt like a perfect fit. "I'm not interested in just showing young, emerging artists," says Montero. "I want Phosphorus to be about experimental practice and art that subverts." She followed *Soma Não-Zero* with a show of the works of Paulo Bruscky, a pivotal figure in Brazil's 1970s Conceptual art scene. His work is notable because, by its very nature – clandestine, private, person-to-person – it managed to evade the censors during the country's long dictatorship.

Phosphorus is aided by donations from collectors and friends, and recently a grant from ProAC, a São Paulo state arts funding body, which provided for four artist residencies and a curatorial/production residency, currently occupied by the Puerto Rico-via-Buenos Aires curator Marina Reyes Franco. Keeping Phosphorus afloat is one of the hardest things she has ever done, says Montero, explaining that she still needs to work on external commercial projects in order to contribute to its upkeep. "I think about giving up every other day," she says. "But I'm told that's a healthy ratio: that it's only when it happens two or three days in a row that you really have a problem."

Away from Centro proper, just a hop from the Pinacoteca art museum, the neighbourhood of Bom Retiro is home to São Paulo's textile industry. Upright bolts of cloth frame shopfronts along streets in this now mainly Korean area of town: Bom Retiro, also home to thousands of Bolivians, is São Paulo's immigrant neighbourhood par excellence, and was at the centre of Jewish life here from the early twentieth century until the 1960s, when much of the community migrated to Higienópolis. It's here that one of the most fascinating of SP's new cultural projects is in the throes of being born – or reborn.

The Casa do Povo (House of the People) was founded in 1953 by São Paulo's progressive Jewish community as a living monument to

those who died in Europe during the Holocaust. With a mission to preserve and promote humanist ideals, the centre was once a hotbed of radical thought, home to a library of 4,000 books in Yiddish; the experimental Taib theatre company; the vanguardist school Sholem Aleichem; a kindergarten, Colônia Kinderland; and the newspaper *Nossa Voz* (*Our Voice*), which was shut down a month after the military coup in 1964.

A victim of a slower, more gradual decline, the school closed in 1980 and the theatre in 2004; and while a tiny flame of cultural and community activity has flickered on all the while – including a traditional Yiddish choir and an amateur theatrical group – the centre shrank in on itself, retreating into fewer and fewer parts of the building's five storeys and eventually leaving the top floor and the basement theatre more or less derelict.

Now with a new team at the heart of the Casa do Povo since last year, headed up by a young Frenchman, Benjamin Seroussi, the Casa is currently reigniting its progressive, experimental spirit and re-creating itself as a beacon for cultural life in the neighbourhood and in São Paulo in general. I visited in June, attending *Biomashup*, a contemporary dance performance in the building's huge, all-purpose second-floor main hall. On the floor below, an art exhibition, *Oásis*, comprised works by São Paulo- and Amsterdam-based artists, including a sound installation, *My Voice Is Jardim da Luz* (2013), in which recordings made in the nearby park were remixed and reproduced by the Polish artist Anna Orlikowska.

Meanwhile, the work of restoring the building and putting the centre's affairs in order continues at both the micro and the macro levels. "We've been working on the details – replacing floor tiles, fixing windows – at the same time as the bigger tasks," says Seroussi. The architect Isay Weinfeld, responsible for some of SP's most prestigious buildings (among them the swish Fasano hotel), is on board as the designer of the forthcoming major renovation project. Weinfeld, who grew up in the area, is undertaking the work as a labour of love, says Seroussi.

There are plans to create ateliers in part of the top floor, which was once the kindergarten; but as for the ruined theatre in the basement, the idea is to take a critical approach, in keeping with the Casa do Povo's questioning, intellectual roots. "Before we do anything down there," says Seroussi, "we want to have the debate: does São Paulo theatre need another stage?"

That critical approach, and the gentle touch necessary to reignite the cultural spark at Casa do Povo, where longtime

members and associates, mostly now elderly, have kept the embers alive for so many years, echoes the care and thoughtfulness that shines through in conversation with almost all of the Centro's fledgling movers and shakers.

"Centro has never been abandoned, never been empty," says Fernanda Brenner. "So I'm not comfortable with the word 'revitalisation'." Like CoLaboratório, Pivô is planning a project, 'Drop Pin', to create a conceptual map of downtown SP – "a kind of critical city guide", says Brenner – taking into account the homes, businesses and agents that are already in the area: "We want to work with what's here, not to replace anything. We want to merge with it," she says. ar

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