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# The making of the Marvellous City

How Rio became the architecture capital of the world

**Rio** has just been chosen as UNESCO's first **World Capital of Architecture.**

Ahead of its coronation in 2020, we walk its urban landscape to find out how it became **the best on the planet**





Words / Sorrel Moseley-Williams + Photography / Leonardo Finotti





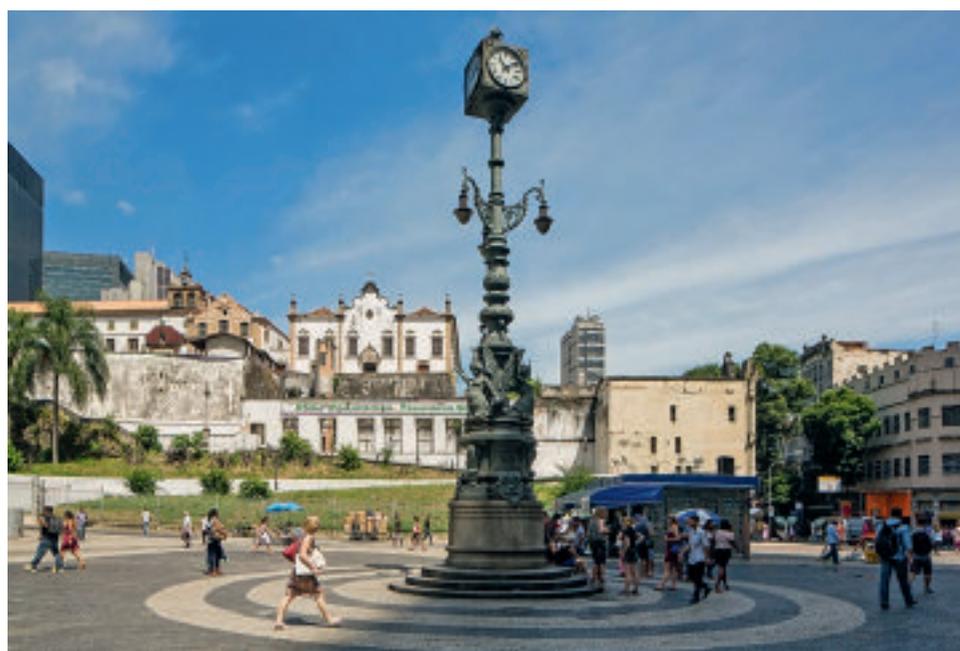
Opening pages  
Oscar Niemeyer's Hotel Nacional (1972) overlooks the beach in the São Conrado neighbourhood  
Left to right  
Roberto Luis Gandolfi's Petrobras HQ (also 1972); the monastery of Santo Antônio sits above Largo da Carioca in Centro

Those who want to understand the story of Rio de Janeiro should head downtown to Largo da Carioca in the Centro district, where you can read it, write large, on the buildings. Look up and there's the 17th-century Santo Antônio monastery – a gem from early colonial times – perched on a hill of the same name.

Peer down Avenida Rio Branco to find the flamboyant Theatro Municipal, a glitzy blend of eccentricity and Art Deco that shows off the former capital's European influences. Go the other way and you'll find the hyperrealistic Petrobras skyscraper, its Tetris-like shape completed in 1972 during Brazil's military dictatorship.

"Losing yourself in Centro on a weekday is the best way to discover Rio," architect and tour guide Uli Rentschler of Insight Architecture advises, as we explore the urban landscape of Brazil's former capital – as diverse as it is tropical. "The city hasn't stopped developing in 500 years and you can read its history through Centro's complex architectural mixture."

In 2012, its melting pot of styles – from colonial to rococo, Art Deco to contemporary – was described as an "exceptional urban setting" by UNESCO as it designated Rio an Urban and Cultural Landscape World Heritage site. In January this year the organisation went one better and announced that the *Cidade Maravilhosa* (Marvellous City, to use its well-earned nickname) would become the very first UNESCO World Capital of Architecture in 2020. »



From right  
The Centros Integrados  
de Educação Pública  
(CIEP) student complex  
was designed by Niemeyer  
in the 1980s – he was  
also behind the curving  
*passarela* (overpass)  
that connects it to the Rocinha  
favela; the Baroque façade  
of Candelária Church



Ahead of its coronation, I've come to understand how the city's architecture helped it win out above competitors Paris and Melbourne, and how it allows visitors to appreciate a different side of a city that's more commonly seen as a place for caipirinhas, Copacabana and carnival.

Rio is so much more than that, Rentschler explains, as we walk up from Cinelândia Metro station. From 1763 to 1960 in particular, it was a political and financial powerhouse – the capital of Portugal's colony, empire and republic. "This area of old Rio was like Little Lisbon during the 19th century," she says, gesturing to the National Library (Latin America's largest), Fine Arts Museum and Municipal Theatre, all designed in the grand Beaux-Arts, or Eclectic, style. "The Portuguese royal family arrived at the port nearby while Cinelândia Square became a copy of Parisian urban renovation. This was the place to be."

While Brazil is best known in the architecture world for Modernist names such as Oscar Niemeyer, Rio's first blockbuster buildings weren't the work of "starchitects" but colonial missionaries and monks. In the years after the Portuguese landed here on 1 January 1502 – naming the city "River of January" in their mother tongue – Jesuit monasteries and Catholic churches popped up all across the region. Later examples of these, as well as colonial mansions for wealthy coffee barons and colourful two-storey abodes from the 17th and 18th centuries, still exist (some still precariously inhabited) around what is today's Centro. »

I learn more about this early history on a “Landscapes of Power” tour around the Catete, Glória and Flamengo neighbourhoods. “To understand the present, we need to look at the past,” says André Andion Angulo, my guide, pointing out the neoclassical Pálacio do Catete (1867). Constructed during the era of empire, the palace became the country’s presidential seat of power in 1897 but lost out in 1960 when Brasília was anointed Brazil’s new capital. Aptly, it now houses the Museum of the Republic.

We also take the funicular to the Igreja de Nossa Senhora da Glória do Outeiro (*below*), a beautiful colonial church from 1730. From its elevated position, the Portuguese tiles and mosaics reveal the richness of Brazil as a colony, as well as foregrounding it as the country with the world’s largest Catholic population (130 million today).

At this vantage point, Andion Angulo uses his umbrella (a weapon to battle the scorching humidity of the Brazilian summer) to point out where Guanabara Bay’s shores used to lie. Land has long been reclaimed in Rio, hills and waters flattened or pushed back to make way for urban and civic landscapes. In this case, the lagoon eventually made way for the Modernist Aterro do Flamengo (Flamengo Park, 1965), also home to the Brutalist Museu de Arte Moderna (MAM, 1955). The park, Rio’s largest, was the brainchild of Lota de Macedo Soares, Brazil’s most prominent female landscape designer and architect. It was also worked on by Roberto Burle Marx, the landscaping mastermind behind many of Rio’s public spaces, including the tri-colour wavy promenade at Copacabana. »



From left  
The colonial Igreja de  
Nossa Senhora da Glória  
do Outeiro, from 1730;  
the colonnade of Affonso  
Reidy’s Museum of Modern  
Art (1955), in Flamengo Park



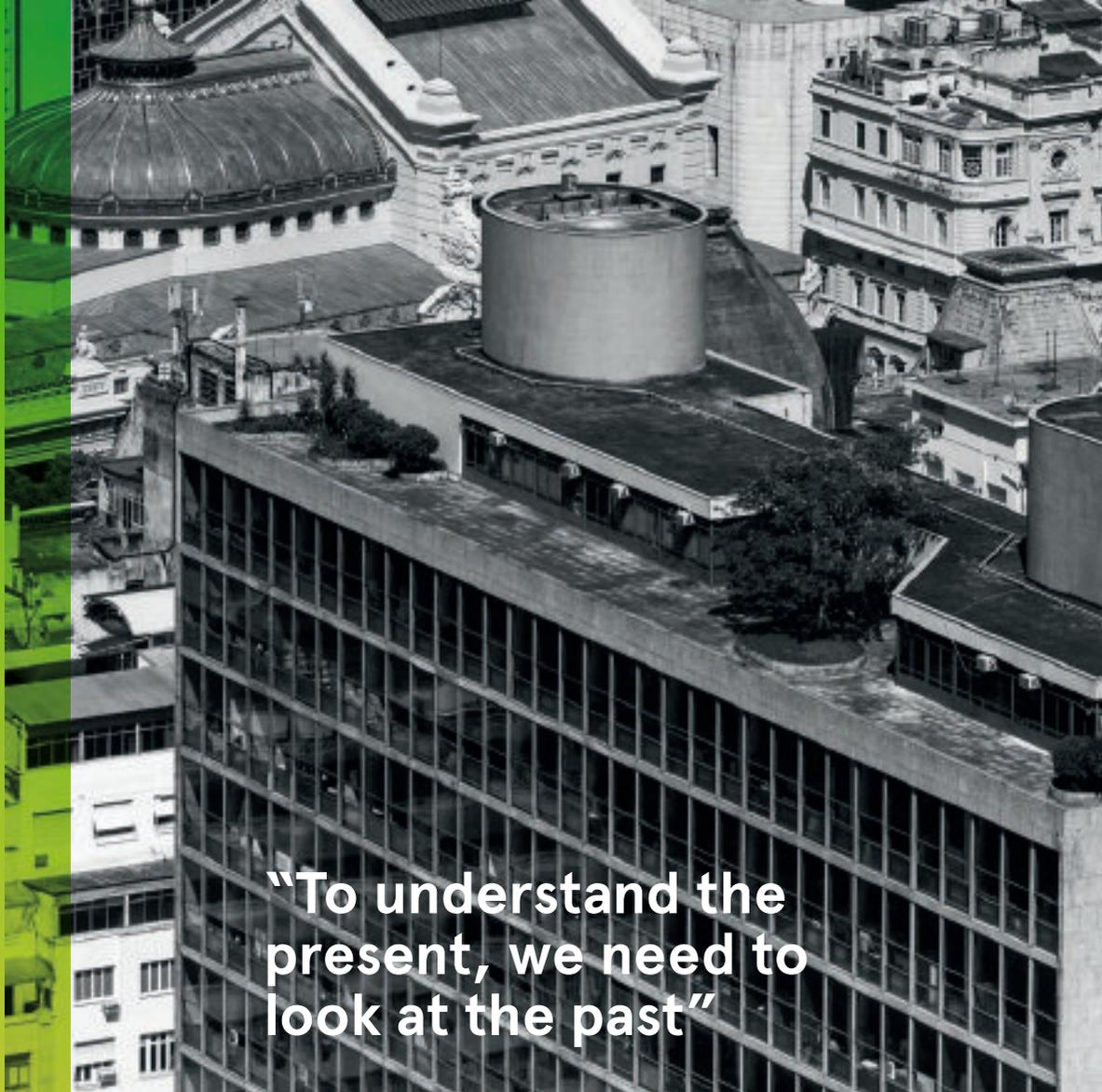
“The city hasn’t stopped developing in 500 years and you can read its history through its complex architectural mixture”

## Get to grips with Rio’s design history

**Take a tour**  
Insight Architecture has plenty of options for a half-, full- or two-day walking tour. Choose from Centro, Copacabana Art Deco, Urban Renewal or Oscar Niemeyer. [insight-architecture.com](http://insight-architecture.com)

**Visit the IAB**  
The Brazilian Architects’ Institute (IAB) overhauled a former tram shed in Flamengo for its headquarters in 2012. It hosts exhibitions and workshops; refuel at the café with a slice of cake. [iab.org.br](http://iab.org.br)

**Walk the Niemeyer Way**  
Take a 10-minute ferry ride to Niterói and walk the Caminho Niemeyer. Highlights include the Contemporary Art Museum (MAC, see p55) and two futuristic domes including the Roberto Silveira Monument. Free visits leave the tourist service centre daily 9am–6pm. [visit.niteroi.br](http://visit.niteroi.br)



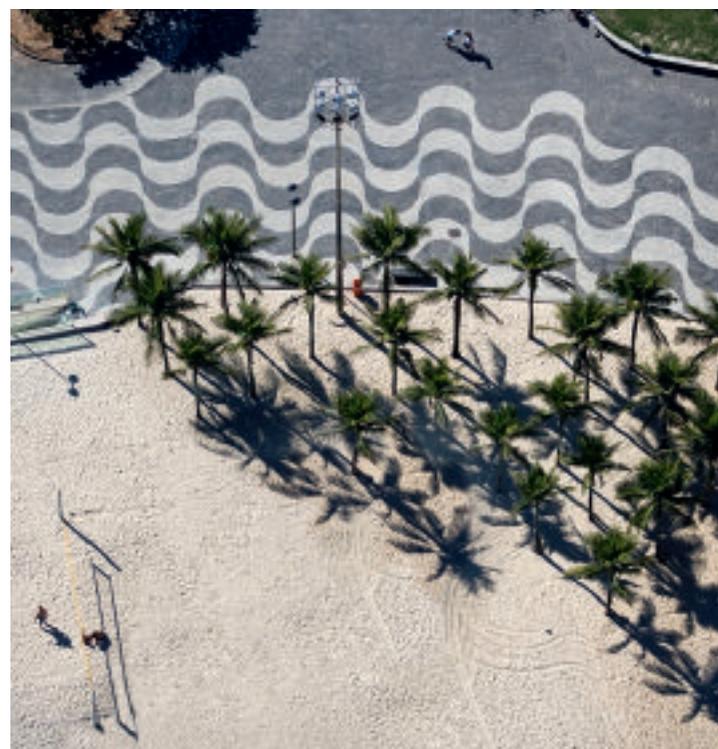
“To understand the present, we need to look at the past”

From left  
The Palácio Capanema was Brazil's first Modernist project and features rooftop gardens by Roberto Burle Marx; Copacabana's wavy sidewalk was designed by Burle Marx and made with Portuguese stone

That district, Andion Angulo tells me, is also home to several prominent Art Deco constructions built during the city's golden age for tourism, including the Copacabana Palace, now a five-star hotel. Of course, the biggest and best example of Art Deco in the city – and the biggest Art Deco statue in the world – is the ever-looming *Cristo Redentor* (Christ the Redeemer). Built between 1926 and 1931, it's an undisputed icon and now one of the New Seven Wonders of the World.

Of all the architectural styles represented in the city – and I count at least 14 – Modernism is the one Brazil is best known for. The world's biggest names in Modern architecture – Brazilians Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa (the forces who developed second capital Brasília), the Roberto Brothers and landscape architect Burle Marx, as well as Franco-Swiss architect Le Corbusier – have all left their indelible marks on Rio.

The jewel in the Modernist crown, according to architect Sérgio Magalhães, committee president of the 27th International Union of Architects (UIA), is Palácio Capanema. The former Ministry of Education and Health (MEC, finished in 1943), Capanema was effectively the Brazilian Modernist movement's first project, designed by an architectural dream team, with Costa and Affonso Eduardo Reidy (who engineered MAM), among others. Burle Marx created the ground floor and rooftop gardens »



# “The biggest names in Modern architecture have all left their indelible blueprints on Rio”

while artist Cândido Portinari created exterior mosaics decorated with shells and seahorses. The icing on MEC’s cake was having the world-renowned Le Corbusier as adviser. “It’s an international masterpiece,” Magalhães enthuses.

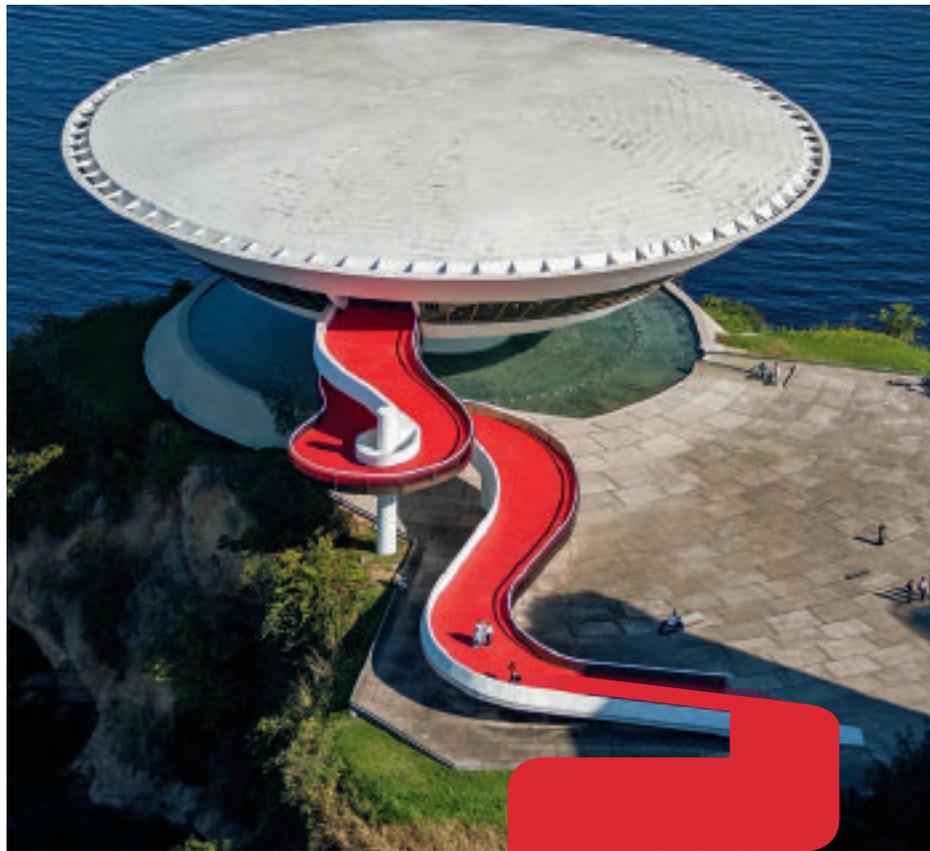
There are also examples of Brutalism here – similar to Modernism in that form follows function in both styles, but Brutalism tends to use geometrics and raw concrete blocks. Notably, there’s Edgar Fonseca’s concrete Cathedral Metropolitana de São Sebastião (1976), which divides critics and is another architectural reminder of Brazil’s 1964–1985 dictatorship. At first glance it looks like a conical Mayan pyramid or dalek, but once inside, the four 64m-high stained-glass windows are awe inspiring. Brutalist elements include natural ventilation – surprisingly functional for humid Rio.

Much more recently, the Olympics gave the city an excuse to add to its constructive treasures. Highlights from the past decade include Bernardes e Jacobsen Arquitetura’s Museu de Arte do Rio (MAR, 2013), known for its “flying carpet” roof, and vital regeneration of Praça XV (an overpass was obliterated to create the Olympic Boulevard).

It’s refreshing to see these new additions giving Rio a 21st-century identity, but according to the local experts more can be done to support homegrown expertise. “The environment was strong in the 1990s but it’s different today,” Magalhães says. “There’s talent but young architects get few opportunities.” That much is evident, given that Spain’s Santiago Calatrava took care of Rio’s most recent big gun, the Museu do Amanhã (2015). »



From left  
The Museu de Arte do Rio, 2013, is part of a project to revitalise the centre of the city; the 1960s Brutalist Cathedral Metropolitana contrasts with the 18th-century Carioca Aqueduct



## Oscar Niemeyer: a Modern icon

A founding father of Modernism in Brazil, Oscar Niemeyer would have loved seeing Rio become the world's architecture capital, says his great-grandson Paulo Niemeyer, president of the Niemeyer Institute for Urban, Scientific and Cultural Policies.

"It's an important tribute and if Oscar were alive, he really would have liked it," enthuses Paulo. "He always told people Rio is the most beautiful city in the world."

While many of Oscar's major works are in Brasília, his Rio legacy is clear: more than 500 CIEP schools - known for their 1960s TV screen-shaped windows - rolled out across the city and state of Rio de Janeiro, as well as the Sambódromo, Banco Boavista and Edifício Manchete.

In Niterói, a city on the northern side of Guanabara Bay, you can discover seven other gems on the Caminho Niemeyer trail, such as his spaceship-like Contemporary Art Museum (MAC, 1996, above). "It's played a large part in the city's regeneration," says the museum's general director, Marcelo Murta.

## While you're in Rio...



### Stay Sofitel Rio Ipanema

Located on the prominent beachfront, Sofitel Rio de Janeiro Ipanema towers 23 floors above the ocean. Doubles are spacious and the buffet breakfast is abundant.

[sofitel.accorhotels.com](http://sofitel.accorhotels.com)



### Eat Lasai

Located within a 1902-constructed house in trendy Botafogo, chef Rafa Costa e Silva only cooks with ingredients sourced from Rio de Janeiro state's tropical pantry to create a delicious tasting menu (best paired with Brazilian wines).

[lasai.com.br](http://lasai.com.br)



### Do Jardim Botânico

An orchid house, a palm-tree avenue and giant water lilies combine in the epitome of tropical paradise at Rio's lush Botanical Garden, landscaped in 1808. A shady haven on balmy days. [jbrj.gov.br](http://jbrj.gov.br)

**“There are challenges... but we hope to encourage a new architectural culture”**



The Museu do Amanhã – the Museum of the Future – is a science centre designed by Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava next to the waterfront at Pier Maua

As 2020 approaches, it will also bring the UIA World Architects Congress, hosted here next July. There's hope that this event, in the context of the World Capital of Architecture accolade, will lead to renewed interest and investment in new architecture. “There are many challenges for a city like Rio that's still developing, but next year's Congress hopes to encourage a new architectural culture,” says Magalhães. Earmarked projects include development of the former cruise-ship terminal along the Olympic Boulevard into a central produce market; Magalhães would also like to see the crumbling Lapa area undergo regeneration.

What's certain is that the city's new title is sure to focus the world's attention on an urban landscape that, while not always cohesive or aesthetically attractive – and at times breathtaking for the wrong reasons – is the basis for a uniquely striking city. Rio's tropical vibes and coastal lifestyle mean it's easy for tourists to forget its buildings. But, as I've found here, architecture can say more about a place than its beaches can. So if you do end up in Rio anytime soon, do follow Rentschler's advice, and lose yourself in the story of how this great city was made. [uia-architectes.org](http://uia-architectes.org), [unesco.org](http://unesco.org)  
*For more great photography of architectural Rio, pick up a copy of Rio Reenquadrado (Rio Reframed) by Leonardo Finotti.*  
*Norwegian flies to Rio from London/Gatwick. Book flights, a hotel and a rental car at [Norwegian.com](http://Norwegian.com)*