

Albert Frey and Lina Bo Bardi: A Search for Living Architecture

This exhibition is part of the Getty-led initiative Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, a far-reaching and ambitious exploration of Latin American and Latino art in dialogue with Los Angeles. It presents an unprecedented exploration of two visionary architects who critically expanded the meaning and practice of modern architecture. Lina Bo Bardi (1914–1992) emigrated from Italy to Brazil in 1946 and Albert Frey (1903–1998) from Switzerland to the United States in 1930. Though the two did not meet, Bo Bardi translated Frey's treatise *In Search of a Living Architecture* for *Domus*, and their personal and professional odysseys are representative of the emergence of São Paulo and Southern California as architectural and cultural laboratories in the middle of the twentieth century. They each created modernist houses, furniture, public buildings, and approaches to urban design that moved beyond strict European rationalism to embrace the social and environmental contexts specific to their adoptive homes in the Americas. Bo Bardi and Frey shared a belief in architecture as a way to connect people, nature, building, and living. Even as they employed modern technologies, they responded to the climate and terrain of the local environment and the people whose personal and social experiences were touched by those conditions.

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A Southern California Constellation of Architects and Designers

Albert Frey formed his vision of the United States from reading popular magazines, travel books, Eric Mendelsohn's *Amerika*, Richard Neutra's *Wie Baut Amerika?* and Frank Lloyd Wright's *Wasmuth* portfolio. The description of new building materials—structural steel, reinforced concrete, and corrugated metal—fostered his interest in being part of the vanguard that had emerged in the United States, joining such architects and designers as Rudolf Schindler (1887-53), Richard Neutra (1892-1970), Kem Weber (1889-1963), Julius Ralph Davidson (1889-1977), and Paul T. Frankel (1886-1958), all of whom had migrated to Southern California from Europe.

Soon after Frey settled in New York, he drove across the United States to Los Angeles viewing and photographing architecture in varied landscapes along the way. He met Schindler at the architect's experimental lifestyle residence, King's Road House, and Neutra at the Lovell Health House, where he saw its pre-fabricated steel-frame construction as an innovative design solution. In 1934 when Frey drove across country again to supervise the construction of the Kocher-Samson building on Palm Canyon Drive in Palm Springs he met architect John Porter Clark (1905-1991). They worked on several projects together from 1935-37 and in 1939 they associated in joint practice, building their own desert homes whose designs became widely known through publication in *Architectural Forum*, *Architectural Record*, *Domus*, and *House and Garden*.

Both Schindler and Neutra also designed houses in the Palm Springs area and Frey had an opportunity to see them in the desert. The construction of the Grace Miller House (1937) and the Kaufmann Desert House (1946) brought Neutra to the desert on several occasions, and Frey entertained the Neutras when they were in town. The Swedish architect Greta Magnusson Grossman (1906-1999), who established her architecture and design studio in Los Angeles in 1940, was friends with Mari and E. Stewart Williams and would visit them and Frey in their new desert home designed by Williams.

As the desert population grew after World War II, architects were drawn to the region where residential and civic commissions were plentiful. William Cody (1916-1978), E. Stewart Williams (1909-2005), Donald Wexler (1926-2015), and Richard Harrison (1924-1995) designed modern structures for homes and schools and collaborated on larger projects. Los Angeles-based architects John Lautner (1911-1994) and A. Quincy Jones (1913-1979) designed spectacular homes for their clients Arthur Elrod, Bob Hope, and Lenore and Walter Annenberg. The spirit of experimentation and open land inspired clients and architects alike to embrace forward-looking, functional, modern architecture designed in concert with the landscape and climate.

Lina Bo Bardi and mid-twentieth century architecture in São Paulo

Lina Bo Bardi arrived in Rio de Janeiro from Italy in October 1946 and, a few months later, moved to São Paulo, where she found a unique environment to develop her design career.

São Paulo blossomed economically and became Brazil's main cultural laboratory in the post-World War II period, offering architects new opportunities. Both veteran and young, local and émigré architects such as Gregori Warchawchik (1896-1972), Rino Levi (1901-1965), João Vilanova Artigas (1915-1985), Oswaldo Bratke (1907-1997), and Lina Bo Bardi experimented with new formal vocabularies, construction techniques, and living conditions. Until then, the modernization of Brazilian architecture had been centralized in Rio de Janeiro, then the country's capital, under government sponsorship and in close dialogue with Le Corbusier (1887-1965).

New lines of design emerged in São Paulo in the postwar cultural context. One of them was in dialogue with the architecture produced in Southern California after Richard Neutra (1892-1970) visited Brazil a few times, published his 1948 book *Architecture of Social Concern in Regions of Mild Climate*, and had an exhibition at the Bardi's MASP (the Museum of Art, São Paulo). Neutra praised modern Brazilian architecture and his work attracted the attention of São Paulo architects. Among them were young architects such as Carlos Millan (1927-1964) and Salvador Candia (1924-1991) and the veteran Bratke who befriended Neutra and had one of his houses published in John Entenza's California magazine *Arts & Architecture*.

These designers adapted the Californian experience, especially as seen in Case Study House aesthetics, to São Paulo geographic conditions and limited building industrialization. Bratke designed the modernist Morumbi subdivision, a new concept in urban living in the late 1940s, resembling the northern hills of Los Angeles. His Americano Residence and Bo Bardi's Glass House inaugurated the subdivision, standing as two pioneer examples of that cultural exchange and an architecture concerned with modern living, landscape, and climate.

Aluminaire House

A Home of the Future

(1931)

Albert Frey

Soon after arriving in New York from Brussels in 1930, Albert Frey began a professional association with A. Lawrence Kocher, managing editor of *Architectural Record*. Commissioned by Aluminum Company of America for the 1931 Allied Arts and Building Products Exhibition in New York, they designed the Aluminaire House as a bold, pre-fabricated approach to modern building. Dubbed “A House for Contemporary Life,” it was constructed entirely of steel and glass and clad in aluminum panels. Its three stories with their space saving, functional plan and built-in furniture measured a compact 22 by 28 feet and was assembled in only ten days.

The house features well-known, European modernist elements associated with International Style architecture, especially slender pilotis that elevate the structure and ribbon windows. In addition, floor-to-ceiling glass walls produce interiors infused with light. Moreover, half of the top floor is an open-air terrace that functions as an exterior room, offering expansive views framed by angled panels and an outdoor experience that is a natural extension of the floor plan. At the same time, it makes use of the technological advances inspired by automobiles, airplanes, and factories that were driving innovative American designs. The result is a design that incorporates industrial materials and mass-construction techniques but also introduces features that would come to define modern design in Southern California and its progressive ideology, especially an interest in the relationship between living and the environment.

The Bardi House

A refuge in nature and culture

(1949-1952)

Lina Bo Bardi

The Bardi House was Lina Bo Bardi's first built architectural project. While planning pedagogical programs for MASP (the Museum of Art, São Paulo), she and her husband, Pietro Maria Bardi, intended to create live-in studios like the Bauhaus master houses in the new Morumbi neighborhood in São Paulo. Though the studios never materialized, they built a home for themselves, which was over time filled with art works and used to entertain the city's growing cultural circles.

This house also served as a model home for the subdivision sales campaign under the slogan "Architecture and Nature," a theme that had been dear to Bo Bardi ever since her editorial work for Italian magazines in the early 1940s. Some of those articles referred to architectural developments in California, including Albert Frey's book *In Search of a Living Architecture*.

The subdivision development emulated the concept of Californian Case Study Houses to create modern and economic structures, responding to site, climate, and geography. The sight of a transparent volume with open views embracing a tree and hovering on defiantly narrow pilotis contributed to the house being seen as a retreat in the woods and called *casa de vidro* (glass house). Despite its nickname, the Bardi House is more than a transparent building representing rationalist and industrial aesthetics.

Careful observation reveals that a solid volume of whitewashed masonry walls anchors the rear of the building. Bo Bardi admired the subdivision's picturesque surrounding landscape, once a tea plantation with wooded groves and vernacular buildings, whose features she praised in the articles she wrote about rural architecture for *Habitat* magazine at the time.

Together, both sides of Bo Bardi's first house reveal the hybrid quality of the architectural conception she pursued with great imagination throughout her life, in dialogue with international debates in architecture and simultaneously rooted in local realities.

Cirell House and La Torraccia (Guesthouse)

Hybrid structures nestled in nature

(1957-58 / 1964)

Lina Bo Bardi

A few years after completing her house, Bo Bardi designed a small house for her friends Valéria and Renato Cirell in the Morumbi subdivision. Built in 1958, the Cirell House is geographically close to the Bardi House—less than 300 meters away—but it is conceptually different from it.

Bo Bardi had turned away from Southern Californian architectural references that influenced the Bardi House design and toward the debate about organic architecture prevalent among her Italian contemporaries. By the time the Cirell House was completed, Frank Lloyd Wright and Antoni Gaudí had become Bo Bardi's main references as stated in her writings and the classes she taught at the Universidade da Bahia in Salvador in 1958.

Instead of a glazed house, she designed solid volumes textured with pebbles, colorful ceramic shards, and plants. The original plan for the Cirell House consisted of two separate midsized blocks nestled in a bowl-shaped site at the edge of araucaria woods. These were connected by an addition in the 1970s. The house's stark volumes resemble rocky formations emerging from the ground. Bo Bardi surrounded them with a wooden deck and porch structure with treelike columns and thatched roofs—later replaced with ceramic tiles—and a concrete foundation covered with stones.

This naturalistic exterior with references to Gaudí conceals a surprisingly bright and rationalist interior. The experience of the living spaces organized around a fireplace, following Wright's architectural concept, is magnified by a wooden mezzanine that spans diagonally across the main volume. Together, the house's interior and exterior reveal the project's hybrid features.

In 1964, Bo Bardi designed the adjacent, rustic guesthouse, La Torraccia, based on Wright's Jacobs Second House. This imaginative house and its guesthouse resonate with her praise of rural architecture in the articles she published in *Habitat* magazine and her lifelong search for aesthetic simplification.

Frey House II

A Dynamic Tension between Nature and Industry

(1963-64 / 1972)

Albert Frey

Although Albert Frey's first Palm Springs residence was demolished, both it and Frey House II continue the exploration of mass-produced, industrial materials he first used in the Aluminaire House. By the time of the house's construction in 1964 Frey was at the center of a group of noted architects who were giving shape to a variation on Southern California's modern building and design aesthetic, which they rooted in the culture, geography, and ecology of the Coachella Valley. Although not technically a separate school of modern architecture, they shared an interest in promoting dialogue between industrial materials and the desert environment.

Frey's first residence had been designed on a geometric grid that allowed for supporting walls to extend beyond expansive glass windows, framing views of the desert valley and dramatic mountains in the distance. His original design for Frey House II maintained this level plan with geometric volumes that opened onto each other and out into the landscape. However, by 1963, the local population had increased dramatically and dense housing development had severely limited open vistas. In addition to the lack of a suitable location on the valley floor for his second home and studio, Frey admitted to looking up at Mount San Jacinto for many years and was drawn to the design challenges of a site on its slope as well as its extensive views.

Frey ingeniously adapted his signature vocabulary of glass and steel construction, bringing it into dialogue with the site's natural rock outcroppings. He even moved the lot line in order to incorporate the house's signature feature, a large boulder penetrating the glass wall and intruding into the center of the living space. He also designed the single room floor plan as a series of poured concrete levels, which brings the house into close alignment with the hillside as it accommodates the grade. Frey House II combines a practical and poetic appreciation of the local desert terrain with a commitment to modern industrial construction techniques that are functional and economic.

Albert Frey (1903-1998)

Educated in Europe and a devoted follower of Le Corbusier, Frey's immigration to the United States brought European modernist thinking to these shores. His work influenced countless architects, including Lina Bo Bardi, though the two never met. Although born in Zurich, Switzerland, Albert Frey developed a life-long fascination with the American West. While still in Europe, he read Neutra's book, *Wie Baut Amerika?* On completing it Frey declared that he knew "some day my destiny would be allied to the opportunities available in that progressive land." By residing in Palm Springs rather than in an urban center, the region's quiet, dramatic beauty captured his imagination and inspired his designs.

Following his formal architecture education at the Institute of Technology at Winterthur in 1924, he moved to Brussels to work for Jean-Jules Eggericx (1884-1963) and Raphael Verwilghen (1885-1963). From there he went to Paris, securing a position in Le Corbusier (1887-1965) and Pierre Jeanneret's (1896-1967) atelier where he worked for ten months until June 1929. While there he contributed to the construction drawings for the Villa Savoye, as well as hardware details, some of which he knew from *Sweets* catalog, an American reference compiled for the building industry.

Through architecture magazines Frey knew of the technological advances occurring in the United States, and the potential to practice architecture there led him to immigrate to New York. Soon after arriving in September 1930 Frey began an association with A. Lawrence Kocher (1885-1969), managing editor of *Architectural Record*. This led to the Aluminaire House, a project for the Allied Arts and Building Products Exhibition, which opened to the public in 1931. Kocher's brother, Dr. John Jacob Kocher, commissioned Kocher and Frey to design a mixed-use commercial and residential building in Palm Springs. In late October 1934 Frey arrived to supervise its construction. While working in Palm Springs, Frey met architect John Porter Clark (1905-1991), with whom he would associate on his return to the desert in 1939.

During Frey's practice, he designed many significant public buildings—Palm Springs City Hall, the Lower Tram Station, Tramway Gas Station, and schools—as well numerous residences. His own homes Frey House I and II were virtual laboratories of innovative design. His varied projects and simple, inventive solutions continue to influence current practitioners.

Lina Bo Bardi (1914-1992)

Born and educated in Rome, Italy, Lina Bo Bardi moved to Milan in 1940 after graduating from the Roman School of Architecture. In Milan, she started her professional training, working on several editorial and curatorial projects during the war. She liked to say: "I became an architect when nothing was built, only destroyed."

After the end of the war, Bo Bardi went to Brazil in October 1946 with her husband, art dealer Pietro Maria Bardi. Their trip, planned as a commercial venture, turned into a permanent cultural odyssey as they were hired to create MASP (the Museum of Art, São Paulo) in 1948.

She arrived in Brazil carrying a classical education and the neo-realist sensitivity of her Italian modernist generation. Abandoning utopian ideals in favor of everyday life, Bo Bardi found privileged cultural conditions in her adopted country to develop her wide-ranging professional career as an architect, furniture and stage designer, editor, writer, educator, and museum director.

Her vision of architecture and industrial design evolved over time, largely informed by her humanistic sensibility, her travels, and her broad intellectual interests and artistic skills. She spent her life between different cities and cultural backgrounds: Italy and Brazil, Rome and Milan, São Paulo and Salvador (Bahia). Those experiences gave her unique exposure to both modern and traditional repertoires, which she strived to reconcile in her work.

Bo Bardi's early search for a living architecture extended into her search for formal and technical simplification, and the embrace of people as protagonists of architecture in her mature years. Despite the limited number of her completed projects, her contribution to twentieth-century architecture is undeniable. In a unique way, Bo Bardi's works expanded the modernist abstract vocabulary with hybrid and vernacular formal references and special attention to physical and cultural contexts.