



SÃO PAULO SYNERGY

Victor Brecheret's *Monumento às Bandeiras*, at the entrance to Parque Ibirapuera in São Paulo.

PHOTOGRAPH BY VICTOR BALONETTI

In a measure of the city's dynamism, artists and collectors are creating an atmosphere of unprecedented activity and, as **Catherine Balston** finds, reinvigorating this historic metropolis along the way.



Chaotic, energetic, unpredictable – São Paulo is all these things and more, a city where the only real constant is constant change. As South America’s largest urban centre, this sprawling concrete megalopolis has to be explored to be understood, and there’s no better time to do that than now, as the city’s cultural scene grows increasingly vibrant. In São Paulo, artists are adopting neglected buildings, historic structures are being renovated and reimagined, and new galleries are opening monthly. Home to the world’s third-largest number of collectors, the city currently counts around 80 galleries, three times more than there were in 2000, largely as a result of the Brazilian economic boom of the aughts. The country is in the midst of an art-making and art-collecting renaissance (Brazilians represent 57 per cent of all South American collectors), and São Paulo is its epicentre.

This effervescence is tangible in the city. You can sense it at São Paulo’s modern and contemporary art-focused fair, SP-Arte, whose 12th edition runs 7 to 10 April this year in Parque Ibirapuera, a major urban green space akin to New York’s



(From top) Oscar Niemeyer’s Auditório Ibirapuera, in Parque Ibirapuera; the sculpture garden of the Pinacoteca museum.

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Central Park. Arguably South America's leading commercial art event, SP-Arte gathers about 140 Brazilian and foreign gallerists inside the Modernist behemoth Pavilhão Ciccillo Matarazzo, which was designed by Oscar Niemeyer to host the fourth Bienal de São Paulo, in 1957. But the fair is just one of the highlights from the city's cultural calendar to take place in Parque Ibirapuera: In September, the Bienal – the world's second oldest after Venice – will present its 32nd edition (under German curator Jochen Volz) in the same Niemeyer pavilion.

Outside those two major events, however, myriad artist-driven venues are popping up. "There's a strong movement among artists here to organise alternative exhibitions beyond the usual circuit," explains Leda Catunda, a São Paulo artist who is part of the celebrated 1980s generation of Brazilian painters. "Sometimes it's in an artist's atelier, or galleries open a space for experimentation." Catunda mentions Aurora, on the first floor of a nondescript building in Centro, where artists curate projects, as well as Ateliê397, in Vila Madalena, "a space for trying things out," Catunda says. "I saw an artist who created a flood there, using plastic and tarpaulins – an interesting commentary on the São Paulo water shortage," she recalls. "He was selling the water. It was really powerful."

For Catunda, perhaps the most exciting of these new art spaces is Pivô, a series of connected rooms split over three storeys in the bowels of Oscar Niemeyer's landmark Copan Building. (The monumental structure is home to about 5,000 residents as well as shops, restaurants and other services.) Yet within the Copan, a 3,500-square-metre space had remained empty for 20 years, until a group of daring young artists took it over four years ago and created Pivô. "They run it as a cooperative, organising visiting artists with little money and a lot of goodwill," explains Catunda.

Artists are also transforming the city's centre. The historic heart of São Paulo and one-time hub of its financial and social scene, Centro slipped into spectacular decline in the 1970s. Today, thanks to the creative energies deployed here in the past fifteen years or so, this neighbourhood feels rejuvenated. Granted, since 2013, part of Centro's artistic vigour has come from investments, notably from Red Bull. The energy-drink company funded the creation of Red Bull Station, which has exhibition spaces, a recording studio and a roster of artists-in-residence inside a refurbished electrical substation. And Centro Cultural Correios, housed in the imposing São Paulo Postal and Telegraph Company's former headquarters, is funded by the Brazilian postal service.

But in Centro, where a few colonial buildings still stand, the creative spirit is far from being fuelled solely by corporate sponsorship and institutional funding. Plenty of new spaces are self-starters, such as Phosphorus, Estúdio Lâmina and Ocupa Ouvidor 63. Music is reviving Centro as well. Take the three-year-old Praça das Artes – a striking

Benjamin Seroussi, curator and director, Casa do Povo

Scoping out the restaurants in each neighbourhood is the best way to get to know the city. In Liberdade, check out Sushi Lika for its fresh fish and Izakaya Issa for hot Japanese dishes such as *okonomiyaki* and *takoyaki*; in Higienópolis, I'd recommend pizza done the São Paulo way at Bráz. On Avenida Paulista, Riviera makes good cocktails. In Vila Madalena, go for the sophisticated and delicate food at Tuju. And in Centro, the local twist on Lebanese cuisine is unbeatable at Almanara. On Sunday mornings, I love going to the Sala São Paulo, when the São Paulo Symphony Orchestra performs for free.



Isay Weinfeld, architect

The thing I love most about São Paulo is its chaos. For shopping I like Amoreira, a concept store that sells everything from stationery and books to gifts, toys and home decor. Another favourite, just a couple of blocks from my firm in Vila Madalena, is Estúdio Manus, which creates ceramics and design objects. When it comes to eating out, the Fasano restaurant and Chou are good choices, while for an early evening drink I'd recommend Botequim do Hugo, a family-run bar that has been around for decades.



Fernanda Feitosa, director, SP-Arte

I would start my ideal day with a bike ride through the grounds of São Paulo's State University, followed by an art exhibition and then lunch. Bar da Dona Onça in Centro serves traditional Brazilian cuisine inside the Copan Building. I'd also recommend D.O.M. and Maní, both regulars on the world's best-restaurants lists. São Paulo is characterised by its streets and alleyways covered in graffiti: The Beco do Batman [Batman's Alley] in Vila Madalena is a good example. As well as seeing Brazilian art in the city's many galleries, there are spectacular collections at Museu de Arte Contemporânea, MASP, the Pinacoteca and the Museu Afro Brasil.



Jefferson Rueda, chef-owner, A Casa do Porco Bar

My ideal day would be spent in Centro, where I live and have just opened my latest venture, the city's first butcher shop/bar. I'd start with breakfast in Café Girondino, then visit São Bento Monastery, buy chilli peppers in Mercado Yamato by the Municipal Market, and look for T-shirts in Galeria do Rock – the mall has a little of everything from São Paulo. Then I'd have lunch in Bar da Dona Onça – order the *picadinho*, a classic beef stew – and go up to the roof of the Copan for the panoramic vista followed by coffee in Beluga.



Leda Catunda, artist

I love to visit the MAC, which is housed in an Oscar Niemeyer building. The collection is split across eight floors, and it's the best collection of modern and contemporary Brazilian art in the country, with lots of international art, too. There's an amazing view from the roof – you can see the whole of Parque Ibirapuera, including the Bienal building, MAM, OCA [a huge domed exhibition space], the Auditório and Vila Mariana. For fashion I love Alexandre Herchcovitch. His style is very international, but there's something alternative, almost clublike about it, with an emphasis on quality.



Adriano Casanova, owner, Casa Nova

You can't visit São Paulo without going to the MASP, for its view over Avenida 9 de Julho, for the building, the collection and its mix of great things. For dinner I like Chou. It's chic and intimate. I also love Rancho Nordestino in Bixiga. It's simple, but the food is incredible and they play live *forró* on Saturday nights. Recently I have been hanging out at a hostel in Pompéia that has a bar in the garage – Hostel da Pompeia. It's very cool, but who knows if it will still be open a month from now.





structure that houses some of the municipal dance companies, choirs and orchestras. Its concrete modules, coloured with ochre pigment, were designed to wrap around the city's original 1886 Music Conservatory and rise over an open urban space. Other music-focused spaces are the Sala São Paulo, an early-20th-century train station turned concert hall, and Casa de Francisca, a jazz venue that is in the process of relocating to a larger space in the Palacete Tereza Toledo Lara. Built in 1915, the Palacete is eclectic, typical of an era when patrons would mix and match European architectural styles. While the inside is modernised, its original features are being restored. "For a long time the city was demolished and rebuilt," explains Maria Fischer, the lead architect on the Palacete's restoration. "It's a trend that is still aggressive today, but for the last five to ten years the city has been investing more in its heritage."

Frenchman Benjamin Seroussi is a cultural player with first-hand experience injecting new life into listed buildings. A resident of São Paulo for ten years, since 2012 he has helped to revive Casa do Povo, a Jewish cultural centre and Holocaust monument founded in 1953 in Bom Retiro, the textile quarter – and his art fairs, residencies, dance workshops and a café and magazine shop have all brought new footfall to the Modernist building. In addition, while Seroussi was a member of the last Bienal's curatorial team,

"FOR A LONG TIME THE CITY WAS DEMOLISHED AND REBUILT," SAYS ARCHITECT MARIA FISCHER. "BUT FOR THE LAST FIVE TO TEN YEARS, IT'S BEEN INVESTING MORE IN ITS HERITAGE."



he became part of a group that established a cultural centre within Vila Itororó, a cluster of residential buildings on the hillside of the Italian quarter, Bela Vista, dominated by a four-storey colonnaded mansion built in the 1920s. Seroussi has set up an outpost amid the construction to test out future uses of the Vila. "Unlike Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo doesn't have a fixed image. It has many faces," he says. "Crossing São Paulo means crossing the many layers that make up this city of constant construction and destruction."

Away from Centro, on the other side of the high ridge along which the bustling Avenida Paulista runs – and where Lina Bo Bardi's hulking red-concrete-and-glass Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MASP) has just undergone significant changes – lies the upscale neighbourhood of Jardins, where the commercial galleries are concentrated. As the young art player and agent Adriano Casanova puts it, "Centro works like a factory of knowledge, of ideas, of art objects. It's the creative heart of the city, whereas Jardins is the commercial centre." Within a few blocks' walk you can stop at galleries Luisa Strina, Mendes Wood DM, Lourdina Rabieh, Emma Thomas, Zipper and the newer arrivals Bergamin & Gomide, Baró and, soon, stalwart Luciana Brito. Casanova himself has a new space in Jardins, the aptly named Casa Nova, where almost everything is for sale, from Olafur Eliasson lamps to reclaimed-wood furniture by local designer duo Gamb.

A ten-minute drive away, in Vila Madalena, another cluster of galleries can be easily covered by foot: Start at the top of the hill at Fortes Vilaça and walk down to Blau Projects, Millan, Bolsa de Arte, Raquel Arnaud, Central and Choque Cultural. The best way to navigate it all? With the handy, free Mapa das Artes, which plots all the city's galleries and art institutions, and which can be found in most galleries. Or better still, just lose yourself amid the chaos.

Catherine Balston is a freelance writer based in São Paulo, where she writes about culture, travel and gastronomy.

(Opposite, from top) Kosushi, a popular Japanese eatery in Itaim Bibi; a vibrant street in the Vila Madalena neighbourhood.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY VICTOR DRAGONETTI

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