

Brazil's Oscar Niemeyer, 98, Still Busy at Drawing Board

Contributed by Isaura Daniel
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It could be just one more university in the Arab world. As in various educational institutions in the region, students there study sociology, psychology and information technology.

But after a quick glance at Mentouri Constantine University you can see that something is different. The shapes of the buildings under which the Algerians study are not conventional. The hand of the main Brazilian architect, Oscar Niemeyer, has been there. He is considered one of the most influential names in modern architecture.

Niemeyer was born in Rio de Janeiro, southeastern Brazil. In Brazil his image is rapidly associated to the federal capital. Niemeyer designed the main buildings in Brazilian capital Brasília, among them Alvorada Palace, the official residence of the president of the Republic, and Planalto Palace, the offices of the federal government.

But Niemeyer is not just a Brazilian figure. His pencil has crossed the Atlantic Ocean to design constructions for the French, Italians and Arabs.

Algeria is a country to which Niemeyer travelled various times at the end of the 1960's, when he was prohibited from working in Brazil due to his participation in the Communist Party. He lived in Europe, in Italy and France. At the time Brazil was living a military dictatorship, which ended in 1985.

In Algeria, Niemeyer designed Mentouri Constantine University, in 1969, at the invitation of then president Houari Boumedienne. Niemeyer, a defender of social topics, is proud of the work. The institution was designed to provide the integration of the various courses taught.

"I like Constantine University because it is different from all others in terms of functional and pedagogical aspects," he said in an e-mail interview. According to information on the architect's Internet site, the project was in the line with a proposal by anthropologist Darcy Ribeiro, who wished for "a freer university, more flexible, which could better accompany the tendencies of students."

Niemeyer also designed Algiers Mosque. "I designed a mosque over the sea, to the surprise of all, connected to the shore by a bridge that surrounds the mosque and protects it from the inconveniences of the waves. With this solution, I proposed the introduction into Algeria of a different and more daring architecture. Boumedienne himself showed his satisfaction: 'It is a revolutionary mosque!', to which I quickly answered, 'The revolution must never stop', this made him smile," explains Niemeyer on his site. The project, however, never came off paper.

Niemeyer also designed the Civic Center in Algiers for the Algerians, in 1968. "The Civic Centre of Algiers is the great monument that Boumedienne dreamt of. The Ministry, the Government Palace, the offices of the Party and the Congress," explained the architect. Boumedienne governed the country between 1965 and 1978 and adopted pro-soviet foreign policy, giving out land and nationalizing oil companies. The Civic Centre project, however, was not executed.

Niemeyer also designed constructions for other Arab countries, like the Emirates and Lebanon, but Algeria is the country in the region with which he is most familiar. At the age of 98 and working actively on his projects, Niemeyer has a list of Arab personalities who are friends, among them the current country president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who met in Algiers, last week, with the Brazilian president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Below are the main stretches of the interview:

What are the constructions you designed in Algeria?

Oscar Niemeyer - Only (Mentouri) Constantine University.

What is the design of the university like? What did you base it on?

The idea was, instead of building a building for each college, to erect just two buildings - one for classrooms and the other for science laboratories.

How did the possibility of designing the building arise?

It was president Boumedienne who convinced me.

You have already stated that the university is one of your favorite. Why?

I like Constantine University because it is different from all others regarding the functional and pedagogical aspect.

What memories do you have of Algeria?

I liked Algeria and the Algerian people very much. I liked the happy way they spoke about their victory over France (Algeria became independent from France, of which it was a colony, in 1962).

You designed your projects in Algeria at a time in which you could not work in Brazil due to your participation in the Communist Party. How did the Algerians look at that?

In France, Italy and Algeria I only found solidarity and good acceptance. The Algerians understood the position of Brazilian exiles and received us warmly.

You also designed, in 1962, the international fairground in Lebanon. How was this project?

Yes. I hated the kind of international fairground I saw in the United States, with various pavilions spread around the city. I designed a building that was 600 meters long in which each pavilion was included. It was a monumental construction; the whole structural part was built. I have just read in French newspaper Le Monde that a protest is being made against the current abandonment of the project. They believe that this project is a masterpiece of modern architecture.

And in 1981 did you work on a project for urbanisation of an island in Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates?

The island was turned to leisure and tourism. It was a project that I worked on with great energy but which, unfortunately, did not come off paper.

How do you see the initiative by president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of bringing Brazil closer to the Arab world?

I consider it very fair.

Are there influences of Arab cultural elements or of Arab culture in your works?

Of course. Current architecture reveals more antique influences; all you have to do is recall the Parthenon.

Do you have any great friend among the personalities of the Arab world? Who, and how did your friendship begin?

Some, among them the current Algerian president, Bouteflika, who invited me to design the offices of the Ministry of Justice.

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