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## Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer leaves lasting imprint on homeland

Jack Chang | McClatchy Newspapers

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RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil -- ]

RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil—Working in his penthouse studio above the lazy curve of Copacabana Beach, architect Oscar Niemeyer has spent much of the last century redesigning his giant homeland.

The Rio de Janeiro native has taken the sensual shapes of the sand and hills of this city and recast them—in schools, theaters and other creations that have risen all over Brazil. And his country has given back, turning him into a living legend and, arguably, the most celebrated Brazilian alive.

Yet Niemeyer, who is weeks away from his 99th birthday on Dec. 15, remains the modest, charming workaholic he has been throughout his career, which spans more than seven decades.

"I worked—there's nothing special about it," he said on a recent morning in his studio while puffing on a cigarette. "What pleases me is I worked but I didn't work in architecture as if it would resolve the world's problems. Architecture isn't important—it's important, certainly—but the most important thing is life."

That humility belies the enormous role Niemeyer has played in the history of his country and profession. No other architect enjoys as intimate a bond with a nation as Niemeyer does with Brazil.

And few living architects are as acclaimed internationally. He's perhaps best known for the layout of the U.N. headquarters in New York, but he's responsible for 175 projects worldwide.

In Brazil, his masterpiece is the country's capital, Brasilia, which he dreamed up out of the red-dirt plains of central Brazil in the 1950s. In a handful of years, he drew up 83 public buildings for the new capital.

But his influence is everywhere. Hundreds of prefabricated public schools are based on a design Niemeyer developed during the 1980s, and his imagination drove the construction of cathedrals, memorials, libraries, the stadium for Rio's annual Carnival parade, and even the slum house of his longtime driver. He works seven days a week in his sunny studio, starting regularly before 10 a.m. and finishing at dinner time.

Niemeyer's designs often celebrate what became his trademark, the curve, molded in reinforced concrete. It even served as the title of his 1998 memoir, "The Curves of Time," in which he tells of long hours, between epic bouts of drinking and womanizing, debating politics and architecture with luminaries such as French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre and Brazilian President Juscelino Kubitschek.

One of his most popular buildings, the Museum of Contemporary Art in the city of Niteroi, across Guanabara Bay from Rio, is a giant, white disc seemingly floating above ocean waters. It was completed in 1996, when Niemeyer was 88. He'd won the Pritzker Architectural Prize, the top award in the field, eight years earlier.

And he hasn't stopped. Niemeyer is finishing up two of the most ambitious projects of his career: a complex that includes a massive theater, churches and other buildings in Niteroi, and a national library and museum designed on a monumental scale in the heart of Brasilia.

Asked about his best work, he at first refused to pick favorites but then cited a new theater in Sao Paulo's Ibirapuera Park. It's one of his most audacious creations—a giant, white wedge holding the lobby and auditorium with a bright red appendage shooting out tongue-like from the main entrance.

In an office at the back of his studio, a black-and-white photograph of two naked, voluptuous female bodies stuck to a wall at eye level serves as inspiration.

"I sought to make an architecture that I think should be done, a thing that creates surprise," he said. "Even the poorest person, who doesn't have conditions to enjoy architecture, stops for a moment in front of a new building and is surprised, is filled with a certain emotion."

Longtime friend and architect Ruy Ohtake said Niemeyer created a distinctly Brazilian architecture that suggested everything from the country's landscape to its music. It also beamed with optimism about Brazil's future.

"He saw architecture as the cultural equivalent to bossa nova and the new cinema of the country," Ohtake said. "Brazil is a country that doesn't have a lot of resources, but we have a lot of creativity."

Niemeyer came to prominence in the mid-20th century as part of the modernist school of designers. The whimsical swoops and curves of his buildings contrasted with the glass-and-steel boxes in vogue at the time.

"He was committed to the instant optical impact that buildings make as physical objects," said Mark Jarzombek, architecture professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "Maybe they're not the best theaters or the best opera houses, but you've never seen anything like

them before."

Some 50 years later, Niemeyer has retained another defining trait of the modernists, who often were as much socialists as they were architects: He's one of the few surviving champions of old-guard communism, along with his friend, Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

Niemeyer's leftist ideas emerged from a genteel childhood. He grew up in the bourgeois Rio neighborhood of Laranjeiras, and his grandfather was a judge on Brazil's Supreme Court.

With Brazilians set to vote in an Oct. 29 presidential runoff, Niemeyer said he supports incumbent Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, a former union leader and radical activist. He also finds hope in a new batch of Latin American leftists, such as Bolivian President Evo Morales.

Lula "is in line with a Latin America that is strengthening itself," Niemeyer said. "The new governments that are emerging everywhere come from a more popular focus, in the way that he represents the thinking of Brazilians who want a more just life, without war."

Despite Niemeyer's fame, those politics have cost him commissions and made him the target of political harassment, especially by the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985. Facing investigations and threats, Niemeyer spent 18 years in European exile.

"He was part of the Brazilian left that still doesn't have much of a role in Brazil," said historian Julio Cesar Pimentel. "Yet he has stuck to that vision for decades."

Critics say Niemeyer's buildings often sacrificed practical concerns such as ventilation and lighting to fancy architecture and socialist politics.

Occupants of a Niemeyer-designed Rio tower housing a business and law school have long complained that none of their offices offer ocean views, even though the building sits on the beachfront. Niemeyer has said he knew that only executives would get such offices so he made sure there were none.

Such idiosyncrasies have endeared Niemeyer to Brazilians and made him one of the country's most beloved figures.

Many worry, however, that Niemeyer's trajectory could finally be ending. He fractured his hip Oct. 8 in a fall at home and was released only on Wednesday.

Niemeyer expressed no such concerns, however, in an interview with McClatchy Newspapers three days before the accident. He said he was at peace with his eventual death and was surprised he had lived so long. His wife of 76 years passed away in 2004, and all of his former colleagues are gone.

It seems certain, however, that his ideas and buildings will survive long after him. He's taken countless young architects under his wing and still hosts Tuesday night talks in his studio about everything from quantum physics to literature.

Hunched in a black leather chair, his piercing eyes undimmed by age, Niemeyer said he gave no thought to his legacy and remained a humble architect awed by the mystery and misery of the world.

"I think life is a gust of breath, it's a minute, a person leaves here his little story and goes away. So it should be a worthwhile one."

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A slideshow of Niemeyer buildings is available at [http://www.realcities.com/multimedia/nationalchannel/news/KRT\(underscore\)Packages/archive/krwashington/Brazil-architecture2/index.html](http://www.realcities.com/multimedia/nationalchannel/news/KRT(underscore)Packages/archive/krwashington/Brazil-architecture2/index.html)

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