

From Award-Winning Pavilion to the Erasure of the Monroe Palace

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In 1904, Brazil took part in the World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri — the Louisiana Purchase Exposition. The event celebrated the centennial of the Louisiana Purchase, the vast territory that had belonged to France and was acquired by the United States in 1803.

To take part in the exposition, the Brazilian government built a pavilion meant to show the country's potential. There the public could see raw materials such as cotton, timber, rubber, and minerals; manufactured goods; and, of course, our famous coffee. The intention was to present a modern nation to the world and to strengthen commercial and diplomatic ties with the United States.

The project was placed in the hands of the military engineer Francisco Marcelino de Sousa Aguiar, who conceived a building in the eclectic style, with an imposing central dome and thirty-six columns that lent grandeur to the construction.

The pavilion drew the attention of visitors for its beauty and received the exposition's principal architecture prize — an important recognition for Brazilian architecture and engineering.

From the outset the building was designed to be reused in Rio de Janeiro. For that reason it was built with a metal structure that allowed it to be dismantled and later rebuilt. When the exposition closed, the structure sailed for Brazil, and the pavilion was reassembled, with some adaptations, at the end of Avenida Central — today's Avenida Rio Branco.

At the fair, the building was known as the Brazilian Pavilion. In Rio de Janeiro it was first called the São Luiz Pavilion and later renamed the Monroe Palace, in honor of the American president James Monroe, author of the doctrine that opposed European intervention in the Americas.

The Monroe Palace soon became one of the great landmarks of what was then the federal capital. In 1906 it hosted the Third Pan-American Conference, a meeting of considerable importance that gathered representatives from many countries. Joaquim Nabuco, then Brazil's ambassador to the United States, played a leading part in bringing the conference about. It was he who suggested the name Monroe, a suggestion taken up by the Baron of Rio Branco, then minister of foreign affairs.

Afterward, the building housed the Chamber of Deputies between 1914 and 1922. In 1925 it became the seat of the Federal Senate, which remained there until the capital was transferred to Brasília in 1960 — with one interruption during the Estado Novo, the authoritarian period in which the National Congress was closed.

With the change of capital, the palace lost its main political function, though it continued to be used by a Senate office and by other public bodies. A process of emptying and decay then began, which in the 1970s would lead to an intense debate over whether the building should remain.

On one side stood those who defended its preservation; on the other, those who wanted it demolished. The advocates of demolition offered various arguments. Some said the palace's location hindered the works of the Cinelândia subway station. Others claimed that removing it would improve traffic and open space for a green area.

The Monroe Palace was a building in the eclectic style, and that style was out of favor at the time. For the champions of modernism, eclecticism was merely a copy of foreign models and did not represent the progress the country wished for itself. The effort to belittle the palace went so far that it came to be called "the architectural eyesore of Cinelândia".

The newspaper *O Globo* ran a major campaign for its demolition. On the opposite side, the Institute of Architects of Brazil, the Engineering Club, the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute, and many professionals tried to prevent the destruction. The palace's defenders argued that decisions of importance to Brazil had been taken in that building — that the Monroe was part of the country's political history. Despite the appeals for preservation, the building was never granted protected status by IPHAN, the national institute for historic and artistic heritage.

In 1975, President Ernesto Geisel authorized the demolition. The company responsible for the work was allowed to sell the materials and fittings removed from the building. So began the demolition of the very building that, in 1904, Brazil had shown to the world as a symbol of its progress and modernity.

In 1976 the building — which had put Brazil in the spotlight at an international exposition, won a major architecture prize, served as the seat of important national institutions, and become a landmark of the city — vanished from Rio's landscape.

The demolition of the Monroe Palace resulted from a combination of factors: urban planning interests, political disputes, the contempt that then existed for eclectic architecture, and the perception, on the part of some, that the building no longer represented the modernity the country wished to project.

Today the site where the palace stood is occupied by Mahatma Gandhi Square, home to a French fountain acquired by Dom Pedro II at an exposition held in Vienna in 1878.

On a visit to the Ricardo Brennand Institute, in Recife, I had the happy surprise of finding two of the marble lions that once adorned the entrances of the Monroe Palace. There they were, survivors of the demolition. Seeing them, I mourned the loss of that most beautiful building and, at the same time, rejoiced to know that they had survived as traces of a history someone dared to erase.

The disappearance of the Monroe Palace remains a warning to society. After all, who decides what is to remain as memory for the generations to come? Who determines what deserves to be valued and what may be discarded?

As the historian Pedro Calmon declared during the campaign to preserve the palace: *"Man's memory is weak. That is why history is the memory of a people."*

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