

The Demolition of the Monroe Palace: Fifty Years of One of the Greatest Crimes Against Our History

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VASCONCELLOS Filho, Leôncio de Aguiar. The Demolition of the Monroe Palace: Fifty Years of One of the Greatest Crimes Against Our History. American Society of History, Arts and Letters, 2026. Disponível em: <https://www.theamericanshal.org/portal/publicacoes/the-demolition-of-the-monroe-palace>.

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Área: Produções Acadêmicas

Publicado em 31 de agosto de 2026

We Brazilians often hear it said that the authorities who hold power over historic cities such as Rio de Janeiro have never shown due respect for our history. It is true. Rio de Janeiro, with the many buildings that remain to it, and thanks to the spread and consolidation of a preservation-minded outlook, still stands as a monumental city — not only in its nature, but architecturally as well. Yet those legitimate movements were not able to prevent one of the greatest crimes against our history: the demolition of the Monroe Palace.

The Monroe Palace — named in honor of a former president of the United States, James Monroe — was a demountable structure, originally conceived to represent Brazil at the World's Fair in Saint Louis, in 1904. Among the many national pavilions, Brazil's was awarded first place. Gold for our country. On its return it was reassembled in Cinelândia, the civic square in downtown Rio, and served as the seat of the Chamber of Deputies from 1914 to 1922, and of the Senate from 1925 to 1937 (in 1930, let us not forget, it served as a base for the revolutionary troops). In 1937, with the Constitution nicknamed "a Polaca" for its Polish inspiration, Getúlio Vargas shut down the whole of Congress, and the Monroe went on to house the Ministry of Justice, the Department of Press and Propaganda and, finally, the Superior Electoral Court. In the wake of the ensuing democratization it returned to its condition as seat of the Senate, until the capital was transferred to Brasília in 1960. From then on it housed a bureaucratic structure nicknamed the "little Senate".

Notwithstanding its glorious trajectory and the enormous beauty of its structure — an eclectic architecture in a markedly cosmopolitan city — and notwithstanding the bygone glory of 1904, a grotesque rag of a newspaper (so called by me for its low moral stature, not for its undeniable influence), allied with the dictatorship installed in 1964, began a sordid campaign to eliminate it. Nothing stopped these people from demonizing the beautiful palace on the feeblest of arguments: that it "obstructed traffic" (though it stood inside a square); that it "blocked the view of the Monument to the Dead of the Second World War" (as if one could not simply walk around it to see that fitting tribute to the soldiers of the Brazilian Expeditionary Force); and that it "was an obstacle to the subway works" (I am no engineer, but I believe that if this were so, cities richly served by subways, such as Paris and Rome, would no longer have any historic landmarks to show — quite apart from the fact that, in a photograph taken before the demolition, the subway excavation appears right beside the palace, with no need to damage it). Besides, being demountable, I do not believe it had foundations deep enough to hinder any underground work (if I am wrong, may some engineer correct me).

That newspaper used intellectually crude and rudimentary language to refer to the pavilion, calling it, for example, "the eyesore of Cinelândia". The campaign lasted until the dictator Ernesto Geisel ordered the criminal demolition, in early 1976 — the year I was born in that most beautiful city. I was born there, but neither I nor my generation, nor those that followed, had the chance to behold the pearl that the Monroe was, because of the mediocre delusions of a journalistic "elite" and of a stupid regime that was not content to kill people (which by itself is utterly abject), but also made a point of assassinating the very history of the country it claimed to govern.

Regardless of all that, Rio de Janeiro went on being the idyllic and proud city it has always been. Not because of them, but in spite of them.

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Translated from the Portuguese original published by the Academia Brasileira de História e Literatura.

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VASCONCELLOS Filho, Leôncio de Aguiar. The Demolition of the Monroe Palace: Fifty Years of One of the Greatest Crimes Against Our History. American Society of History, Arts and Letters, 2026. Disponível em: <https://www.theamericanshal.org/portal/publicacoes/the-demolition-of-the-monroe-palace>.