6+

GES–2

If These Walls Were Water

10 Jul —
19 Oct 2025

Lina Bo Bardi

V A C

Exhibition

fig. 1,2

Lina Bo Bardi (1914—1992) belongs in the pantheon of the world's most revered and influential architects. Today, 33 years after her death, her hugely varied work is attracting ever more interest as the scale of her talent becomes ever more apparent.

After training in Italy in the 1930s, Bo Bardi emigrated to Brazil in 1946, where for half a century she enthusiastically absorbed local traditions and creatively interpreted the country's rich folk culture, while maintaining a dialogue with international modernism. Her approach to architecture and design championed social engagement and cultural specificity against the flattening of distinctive features that came with modernisation

The other principal feature of Bo Bardi's vision (which inspired the title of this exhibition at GES–2) was her attitude towards the city as an organic, fluid entity, in constant movement, like the natural world.

The exhibition *If These Walls Were Water* presents Bo Bardi's work from two complementary perspectives. At the centre of the narrative, on GES–2's Prospekt, we see the Sesc Pompéia complex, designed between 1977 and 1986, a former factory in the expanded centre of São Paulo that was converted into a cultural, sports, and leisure centre for workers. In designing Sesc Pompéia, Bo Bardi did not simply adapt spaces to new needs but created a flexible shell for a whole range of social situations and events, from recreational to educational, contributing to the institution's cultural model. The installation on the Prospekt is composed of elements from Bo Bardi's imaginary universe, which found expression in her work on buildings, design, and scenography. It is primarily an attempt to reflect the architect's idea of culture as a space of community, conviviality, and equality. A similar impulse is embedded in the architecture and institutional model of GES–2 House of Culture, which is based on creative communication, horizontal connections, and non–hierarchical modes of knowledge production.

The second part of the exhibition (in Gallery C6) aims to reveal the full breadth of the "Bardi–verse," ushering visitors into Bo Bardi's intellectual laboratory through a rich panorama of forms of creative expression, from sketches made on the fly to detailed drawings, from furniture to excerpts from texts, photographs, and archival footage. In her work, Bo Bardi transcended disciplinary boundaries, approaching architecture with an anthropological perspective that combined popular knowledge with avant–garde experimentation, tackling every new challenge with unwavering rigour. She praised the architects of the Renaissance for being "masters of life" and she herself saw every new project, whether a house, museum, or theatre set, as an opportunity to transform everyday life through constructive means. The fruits of her approach can be seen in such iconic buildings as the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP, 1957—1968), where galleries hover above the ground, disrupting the familiar museum topography and freeing the ground level for bustling city life, and where paintings are mounted on spectacular glass easels that blur the boundary between work and viewer, radically democratising museum experience.

Shown in Russia for the first time, these objects and archival materials create a comprehensive portrait of Bo Bardi's (an)architecture, which is formally inventive and at the same time rooted in a living social context. It is an architecture that puts the human being at centre stage.

If These Walls Were Water. Lina Bo Bardi
Exhibition
10 Jul—19 Oct 2025
Prospekt, Gallery C6

6+

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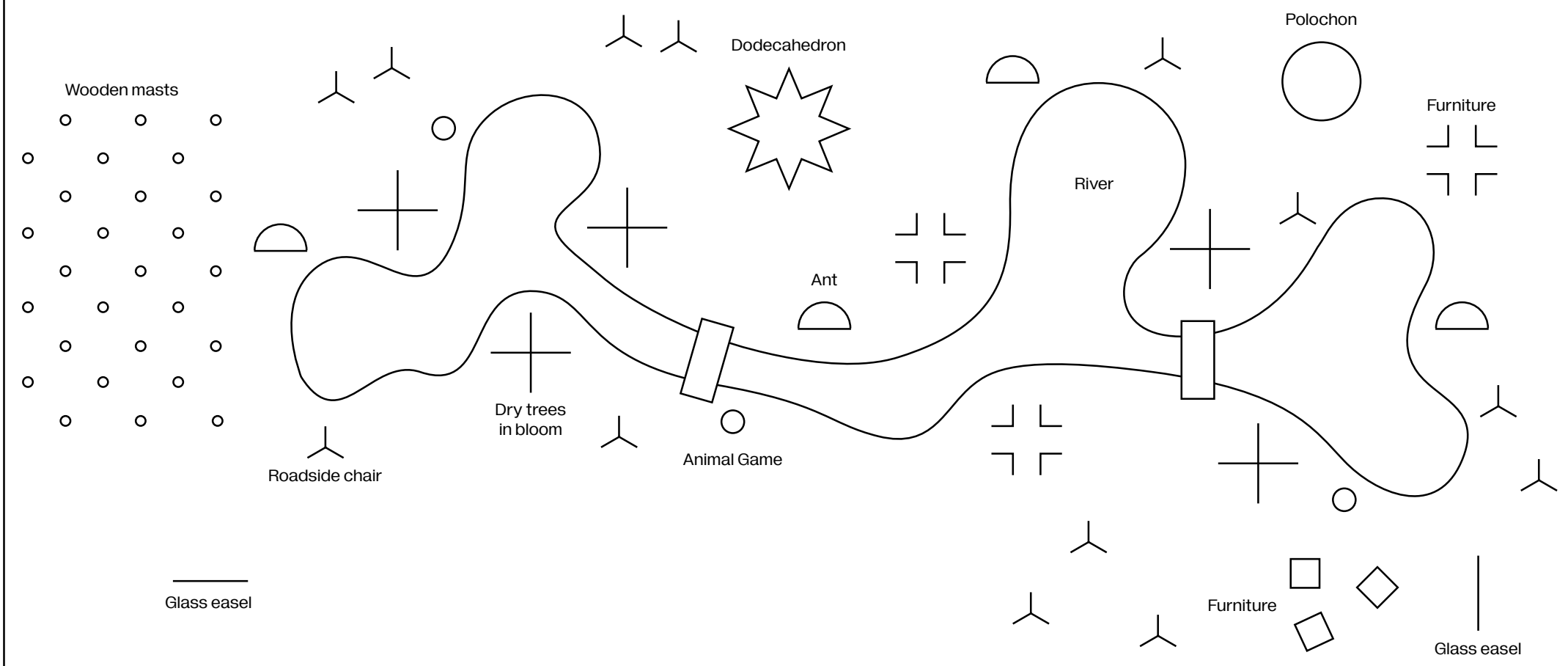
Special thanks
to Marcia Benevento for her contribution to the creation of *Polochon*

Special thanks to the director, teachers, and students of START ART School in Moscow for their contribution to the *Wooden Poles* installation.
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Special thanks
to Stroganov Russian State University of Design and Applied Arts and its textile design students for the contribution to the creation of the *Dodecahedron*

The objects in the Prospekt reproduce some of Lina Bo Bardi's original works, authorised by the Instituto Lina Bo and P. M. Bardi.

GES–2 House of Culture
15 Bolotnaya Embankment
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ges–2.org



The installation on the Prospekt at GES-2 attempts to recreate elements of one of the iconic buildings of the twentieth century. The Sesc Pompéia culture and leisure centre in São Paulo, completed in 1986, was the crowning achievement of Lina Bo Bardi's long and prolific creative career, and it brings together the key elements of her approach to architecture and design.

Sesc Pompéia is an adaptation of the site and buildings of a former steel-barrel factory in the working-class neighbourhood of Pompéia in São Paulo. In 1977, the property was acquired by Serviço Social do Comércio (Social Service of Commerce, or Sesc), a Brazilian non-profit organisation, and Lina Bo Bardi was invited to transform it into a leisure centre for the residents of the neighbourhood and the city. She worked on the project together with the co-curators of the GES-2 exhibition, the architects Marcelo Ferraz and André Vainer. A studio set up inside the former factory building functioned as a laboratory where architects, engineers, builders, and Sesc staff worked together.

Bo Bardi's approach was to empty the former sheds and industrial spaces without changing anything in their structure. As she said herself: "We just added a few small things." One of the former factory sheds, converted into a covered atrium, features a sinuous reflecting pool and an enormous hearth for an open fire. It adjoins a theatre, concert and exhibition halls, a library, a cinema, a restaurant, a café and even an artificial beach. Two new sports buildings were erected, connected by open walkways: their tall concrete structures contrast with the old, low industrial buildings made of exposed brick. The result is an exceptionally striking ensemble—a landmark in the city of São Paulo.

Sesc Pompéia has always been open to all comers, from notable visitors to local homeless people. Ever since its opening in 1982, near to the end of the military dictatorship which ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985, this cultural centre has been perceived not only as a vibrant hub of city life, but also as a symbol of change: the freedom of programming, which is its hallmark, would have been unthinkable at the height of military rule, when the interest in popular culture, emphasised by Bo Bardi in her exhibitions, was also discouraged.

Many of the objects displayed on the GES-2 Prospekt were created with input from students of START ART in Moscow and the Design Faculty of the Stroganov University of Design and Applied Arts. They refer both to milestone exhibitions at Sesc Pompéia and to Bo Bardi's other theatre and design projects. Each exhibit reveals a particular facet of her revolutionary vision: for Bo Bardi, culture, and indeed life itself, were meaningless without social anchoring. In her world, the natural coexists with the man-made, and there is always room for humour and mischief, eager curiosity and unfettered imagination, all with the ultimate purpose of elevating human dignity.

Wooden Masts
Flags fixed to wooden masts and poles are a traditional accompaniment to festivals all over Brazil, particularly during the so-called *Festas Juninas*, held in the month of June in honour of Saints Anthony, John the Baptist, and Peter. The celebrations date back to rituals associated with the summer solstice. In rural areas, images of the saints, entwined with paper ribbons, fruit, and trees, are hoisted directly onto poles. In 1984, Lina Bo Bardi asked everyone involved in the preparation of an exhibition at Sesc Pompéia dedicated to rural housing, from architects to workers, to paint a mast. The masts were then placed together to create a mini-forest, adorned with an eye-catching array of bright patterns, forming a whimsical colonnade seemingly stripped of their ethnographic origin. Inspired by Bo Bardi's idea, students at the START ART school in Moscow took the game of reinterpretation to a new level.

Ant
A construction worker with the nickname Paulista created the giant effigy of a leaf-cutting ant (a fearsome agricultural pest) at Lina Bo Bardi's request. The ant was displayed in the exhibition *Intermission for Children* (1985), which brought together all kinds of animals and their effigies, made using different techniques and materials, some of them (like the ant) enlarged to fairy-tale proportions, along with stuffed animals, butterfly collections, and various specimens from natural history museums. The exhibition aimed to stimulate children's curiosity, awaken their imagination and, at the same time, introduce them to scientific knowledge in a way that was exciting and accessible.

Dodecahedron
This is a replica of a work created by Lina Bo Bardi for the 1985 play, *Ubu—Folias Physicas, Pataphysicas e Musicaes* ("Ubu, Physical, Pataphysical and Musical Follies"), staged by actor and director Cacá Rosset based on Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*. Bo Bardi designed the set for the play, including two dodecahedra, one of which stood at the entrance to the theatre and the other on the stage. They symbolise the "pataphysics" mentioned in the play title—a pseudo-philosophical science invented by Jarry, which deconstructs reality in a comical way in order to recreate it using absurd methods. Parodying Aristotle, the term "pataphysics" is a scrambling of the ancient Greek "ta epi ta metaphysika" meaning "that which comes on top of metaphysics." The dodecahedra allude particularly to another play in the Ubu series, *Ubu Cornu* ("Ubu Cuckold"), in which a character named Achras writes a treatise on the morals of polyhedra, and also to Brazilian columnar cactuses.

Polochon
Polochon was part of the set design for the play *Ubu—Folias Physicas, Pataphysicas e Musicaes* ("Ubu, Physical, Pataphysical and Musical Follies"), based on Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* and performed in São Paulo in 1985 by Teatro do Ornitorrinco ("Platypus Theatre"), directed by Cacá Rosset. Jarry's grotesque comedy premiered in Paris nearly a century earlier, in 1896, causing a scandal and anticipating Dadaism and the Theatre of the Absurd. In their version of *Ubu*, Teatro Ornitorrinco combined satire, circus, dance, and music. Polochon was a bizarre pig with two ends that greeted the audience in the theatre foyer, then came on stage to announce the start of the performance and remained there until the finale, reinforcing the absurdity of the action. The Brazilian play ran for more than three years, featured in several international festivals, attracted audiences in excess of 350,000, and won numerous awards at home and abroad. In 1989, Polochon was included in the only exhibition of Bo Bardi's work held during her lifetime, *Architecture and...*, at the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism of the University of São Paulo. A year and a half after her death, Polochon brought humour and vitality to the large-scale exhibition, *Lina Bo Bardi*, at the São Paulo Museum of Art, and then accompanied the exhibition on its tour around seventeen countries of Europe, America, and Asia from 1993 to 2001.

Furniture
The sofas and children's boxes were created especially for Sesc Pompéia, to occupy the area around the water mirror, in the large living and leisure area. The furniture was designed by Lina in her final phase, disbelieving in the direction that industrial design had taken—objects of pure consumption,—while Lina believed that furniture should always be part of the architecture, responding to the specific demands of each project. They were produced on-site at Sesc Pompéia, by construction workers and not specialised carpenters. Industrial wood laminate and melamine laminate were used for the boxes; wood laminate and truck tarpaulin were also used for the sofas: high-resistance materials to last and withstand intense use by a large public.

River and Dry Trees in Bloom
This installation refers to one of the most remarkable features of the Sesc Pompéia complex—a sinuous reflecting pool, reminiscent of the course of Brazil's São Francisco River. The water surface was meant for children to play with, but also to put visitors in the mood for contemplation. As Lina said: "You can make a beautiful and pleasant place out of almost nothing. We just added a few small things: a little water, a fireplace." In the atrium space people could splash in the water or light a fire in a huge hearth set in the middle of the floor. What she created was a symbol of a new type of cultural institution, centred on space for relaxation and communication, where nothing could happen or anything at all could happen. Exhibitions, concerts, and meetings of much significance for Brazilian cultural life were held around the pond. The water feature was surrounded by dry trees decorated with coloured ribbons. Lina had been fascinated from an early age by dry flowers, as can be seen in her childhood and teenage drawings. The use of coloured ribbons shows how a human touch can give a new lease of life to dead trees.

Jogo do bicho (Animal Game)
Jogo do bicho ("Animal Game") was invented in 1892 by the owner of a zoo in Rio de Janeiro as a ploy to pull in the public. It was a lottery where four numbers between one and hundred were assigned to each of the twenty-five animals in the zoo. The game was banned in 1895 on the pretext that it amounted to gambling, but it had already caught on and the draws continued underground. Many bookmakers, known as *bicheiros* (from *bicho*, meaning "animal") used money earned from the draws to support samba schools, helping them to prepare for carnival. The drawings (presented in copy) were made in 1958 by self-taught artist Teófilo Silva. Lina Bo Bardi took a liking to them and bought them for her collection.

Roadside Chair
Lina Bo Bardi made this *Cadeira de beira de estrada* ("roadside chair") in 1967 from four tree branches found by the side of the road. The name "roadside" does not refer only to the origin of the materials: it is also a subtle protest against the paths taken by industrial design. In late capitalism furniture has become a consumer item, where appearance is more important than comfort, and local cultural characteristics are no longer taken into account. Bo Bardi drew her formal inventiveness and preference for unpretentious materials from folk culture.

Glass Easels
The *cavaletes de vidro* ("glass easels"), designed to display paintings without the need for walls, are among Lina Bo Bardi's most daring projects. They were created in 1968 for the new building of the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP), which had been founded by her husband, Pietro Maria Bardi. The easels consist of cubic concrete blocks, 40 × 40 cm, with a groove into which a sheet of tempered glass is inserted and held in place by a wooden wedge. The paintings are then affixed to the glass. Thanks to the device, paintings could be taken out of the two-dimensional plane of walls and be freely arranged in space. The canvases appear weightless, suspended in mid-air. Bo Bardi justified the gesture, quoting Vladimir Mayakovsky's revolutionary summons: "It's high time for bullets to tinkle across museum walls".* She demystifies the work of art, exposing its materiality and presenting it for the viewer's judgement.

*Translated by James McGavran

The exhibition continues in Gallery C6 on 2 Floor