

Statement
on
The Preservation of the Palácio Gustavo Capanema, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Society of Architectural Historians
Heritage Conservation Committee

The Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) expresses strong support for the preservation of the Palácio Gustavo Capanema, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Background

The Palácio Gustavo Capanema (designed to house the Ministry of Education and Health) was designed in 1936 (completed in 1945) by architects Lúcio Costa, Affonso Eduardo Riedy, Jorge Moreira, Carlos Leão and Ernani Vasconcellos, with Le Corbusier briefly serving as a consultant. The structural engineer was Emilio Baumgart. The gardens were designed by Roberto Burle Marx, murals were created by Candido Portinari, carpets were designed by Oscar Niemeyer, and sculpture was created by Bruno Giorgi, Adriana Janacópulos, Jacques Lipchitz and Celso Antônio. The building was the result of an initiative by Minister of Education Gustavo Capanema, after whom the building was named, with the support of the Getúlio Vargas government. The building utilized bold colors and a contrast of right angles and flowing curves. Curved, blue-tiled rooftop structures concealed elevator overruns and water tanks. Northern glass walls received adjustable Corbusian *brises-soleil* to control light in the building. The Palácio Gustavo Capanema melded an airy public plaza with monumental columns supporting the tower. The inclusion of landscaped terrace filled with tropical plants - designed to be seen from the tower above - made an immediate, incisive statement about Brazil's place in the development of modern architecture.

As the first major modern building in Brazil, the Palácio Gustavo Capanema is an internationally recognized landmark of 20th century architecture. The building at once recalls Le Corbusier's urban visions of the 1930s while at the same time exhibiting a powerful orientation to the natural world around it. The project melded the skyscraper form - a building type, at the time, generally used for private, commercial projects - and transmuted it into a civic building adapted to the climate of Brazil. The Palácio Gustavo Capanema is a remarkable assemblage of modern architecture, engineering, landscape architecture, and decorative arts, together embodying Brazilian identity, and was placed on Brazil's tentative UNESCO World Heritage List in 1996.

Issue

Restoration work on the Palácio Gustavo Capanema began in 2014, with a second phase of work in 2017. At that time, the Palácio Gustavo Capanema was closed, and units housed in the building were moved to rented spaces. Restoration work included envelope restoration, elevator modernization, waterproofing of the terrace, garden restoration, and other much-needed work. On 27 August 2021 the Bolsonaro government announced its intent to sell the 16-story building, along with another 2,263 federal properties in Rio de Janeiro (and some 3,800 properties overall), to private investors in an effort to divest the government of some \$5.8 billion in property. While the Palácio Gustavo Capanema was withheld from the auction, its future is far from secure, and there are no preservation protections in place for the building, and no guarantee that will not be included in a future auction remains. The Palácio Gustavo Capanema is a building of enduring social and cultural importance, and the threats to its future continue.

The Palácio Gustavo Capanema is a building unique to Rio de Janeiro, and one of international architectural

significance. Its protection and preservation is essential. At present there is no governmental protection for this irreplaceable building. In the rush to privatization, this remarkable landmark is at great risk. The Palácio Gustavo Capanema must be preserved.

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Society of Architectural Historians
Heritage Conservation Committee*

Bryan Clark Green, Ph.D., LEED AP BD+C
Chair, Society of Architectural Historians Heritage Conservation Committee

Mr. Kenneth Breisch, Ph.D.; Ms. Mary B. Brush, FAIA; Mr. James Buckley, Ph.D.; Mr. Jeffrey Cody, Ph.D.; Mr. Anthony Cohn, AIA; Mr. David Fixler, FAIA; Ms. Priya Jain, AIA; Mr. Theodore H. Prudon, Ph.D., FAIA, Ms. Pauline Saliga; Ms. Deborah Slaton; Ms. Victoria Young, Ph.D.; Members, SAH Heritage Conservation Committee.