

The young Paulo Mendes da Rocha: Jockey Club of Goiás and a modernity project

BY ELINE CAIXETA AND CHRISTINE MAHLER

The Jockey Club of Goiás, located in the city of Goiânia, in the interior of Brazil, was the first building to adopt the language of exposed concrete in this city, in addition to other attributes of architectural and urban relevance. This discussion aims to analyze the design approach, the tectonics, the urban setting, and its transcendence in the architect's career. It examines the conception of the project and identifies similarities between this project and his future work.

The architectural production of Paulo Mendes da Rocha (1928-2021) is of indisputable quality, as attested to by the publications about his work, as well as the awards and exhibitions of international recognition. Recently, to talk about the architect is to bring out intensified feelings about the collection so dear to Brazilians, especially on the occasion of the donation of his work to *Casa da Arquitetura* [Architect's House] in Portugal, released in mid-2020.

His career, since graduation in 1954, coincides with a period of broad flourishing of civil construction and the diffusion of modern architecture in Brazil, through the decentralization of the economy of the Rio de Janeiro – São Paulo axis to the interior of the country, as well as with the projects of several architects who brought innovative proposals to the hinterland, imbued with precepts still unknown in these regions of the country.¹

Goiânia, capital of the state of Goiás – planned in the 1930s under the discourses of modernity² – is the bearer of four works by Mendes da Rocha,³ among which is the Jockey Club of Goiás, that figures in the first decade of the architect's career. In the 1960s, the capital aroused the curiosity of young professionals, according to the architect, "(...) for being a new city, a favorable locus for the construction market."⁴

At that time, most Brazilian capitals were investing in recreational clubs for the leisure of the population. During this period of full growth, there was a great volume of construction work in Goiânia that responded to the demands of that time, among them an urban club. Created in 1937, the Jockey Club occupied a large area in the urban center, with an eclectic building as its headquarters, which would soon become obsolete. Thus, it

was decided to demolish the original headquarters and, in 1962, a national competition for preliminary projects was started, promoted by the Brazilian Institute of Architects, for the construction of the new headquarters in the same area.⁵

A year earlier, Paulo Mendes da Rocha had won an award at the *VI Bienal de São Paulo* with the *Ginásio Clube Atlético Paulistano* [Paulistano Athletic Club Gymnasium] project, designed in 1958.⁶ According to the architect, this award might have influenced the invitation to participate in the Jockey Club headquarters' contest, which he later won.⁷ Paulo Mendes da Rocha then developed the project in collaboration with João Eduardo de Gennaro (1928-2013) between 1963 and 1964, and the construction was concluded in 1975.

During this period, the duo designed the projects of *Fórum de Avaré* [Avaré Forum] and

Grupo Escolar de São José dos Campos [São José dos Campos School Group] (1961), *Faculdade de Filosofia* [Faculty of Philosophy] (1962) and *Clube da Orla de Guarujá* [Guarujá Waterfront Club] (1963),⁸ which have elements in common with Jockey Club's design. For presenting solutions that are conceptually close, which will be present also in later works, one can infer the importance of the Jockey Club project, in the context of experimentation that characterized his first ten years of work, for the formation of the architect's repertoire.

On the other hand, the new headquarters of the Jockey Club of Goiás was the first concrete building in Goiânia to exert influence on local architects, in a period coinciding with the creation of the first school of architecture in the state in 1968. This influence manifested, not only through the technology used, but also the way in which the building was inserted into the site, creating new spatialities and transforming the pre-existing landscape, with a new reading of modernity.

Hélio Piñon (1942-) identified a constant in Paulo Mendes da Rocha's work as the "identification of the concrete problem to be treated in each case" and the attention to the specificities and nature of the place, in order to make it habitable, which, according to the author, contributes to its capacity to "bring out the essential."⁹

In the text "Depoimento" published in the magazine *Acrópole*, Paulo Mendes da Rocha speaks of his first ten years of professional activity as a process of continuous learning in which serious teamwork, since its conception, plays an important role: "10 years for a



01 Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Jockey Club of Goiás, Goiânia, Brazil, 1962-1975.
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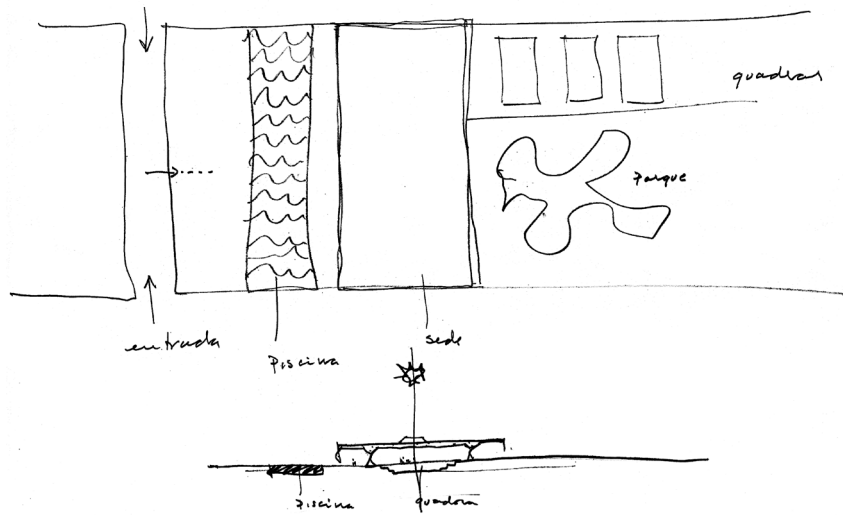
work represents very little when it is the first 10 years. In short, it is a single project, where perhaps there is with certain evidence, the fundamental concern of an adequate space.¹¹⁰

Among the highlights of the work in question are the first concerns of the place as a defining element of the design approach. The 22,000 square meters (m²) site is located in the center of the city, contiguous to two large roads – Anhanguera and Tocantins avenues –, near the *Cine Teatro Goiânia* [Goiânia Cine Theater]¹¹¹ (an Art Deco building from the 1940s) and within the banks of the Buritis stream (one of the water courses that comprise the region's water system), possessing a flooded stretch due to its outcrop on the path of the stream to native forest. In the project, the vegetation was maintained,¹¹² as a reference to the foundational elements of the site. This decision indicates an important trait that would come to permeate future works, aiming for the integration with the place and its “urban anchorage,”¹¹³ even if it was one of the contest conditions.

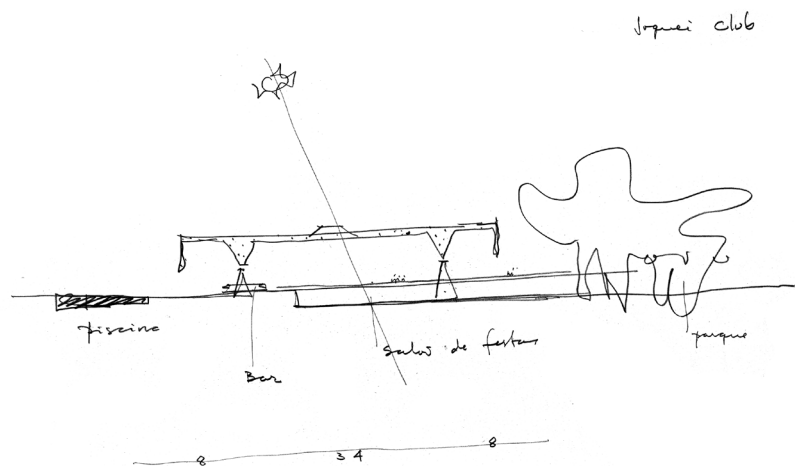
At that time, the Jockey Club's land was located in a strategic area from the point of view of the city's growth, as it bordered on the *Setor Oeste* neighborhood, an urban area in expansion. It was, therefore, a “difficult anchoring”¹¹⁴ project. Paulo Mendes da Rocha proposed a singular articulation with its surroundings, generating new urban spatiality and giving it monumental status. “The building assumes a double reading: it presents itself at the same time as a solid built prism and acts as a diaphanous portal that connects the covered space with the open.”¹¹⁵

Regarding the architectural and urban solution, a great introspective horizontal plan is observed, which organizes three distinct sectors: the pool square, the covered square (building) and the park (native forest). These elements constitute the transverse and tripartite architectural parti, together with the transversal relationship of the building to the access points. The area of the institution occupies almost the entire block, separated from the eastern portion of the block not belonging to the club by an internal street that gives access to the club site's main entrance. This characterizes the architect's “transverse approach.” According to the architect, he wanted to “risk” this solution in the Jockey Club competition, because he considered it more appropriate to the place.¹¹⁶

The decision of the design approach, with the opposition between wooded park and pool square, was decisive as it preserved the forest. This option respects the original



02 Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Jockey Club of Goiás, Goiânia, Brazil, 1962-1964. Transverse design approach and covered court section. © Paulo Mendes de Rocha Collection, Casa da Arquitectura, Matosinhos.



03 Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Jockey Club of Goiás, Goiânia, Brazil, 1962-1964. Party Room section. © Paulo Mendes de Rocha Archive, Casa da Arquitectura, Matosinhos.

vocation of the place and its environmental nature, due to the outcrop of the stream. The building was inserted in the centre of the site, leaving the peripheral areas free, mediated by the building. The result seen from the outside presents an alternation between walls and blank end walls, with discrete volumetry and strong presence in the urban context.

In the definition of the design, three traditionally urban spatial categories – the street, the square, and the park – were confronted, synthesized and used as the strategy of urban insertion. Two of these categories were already present in previous projects, such as the Paulistano Athletic Club Gymnasium, when it refers to the swimming pool area as a “swimming pool square,” and the Avaré Forum, when it says that “the project is essentially a covered square” and calls the raised galleries

“inner streets.”¹¹⁷ In the Guarujá Waterfront Club, there is an alternation of urban categories, with the use of a design approach that opposes beach and pool, articulated by the building as “a suspended pavilion supported on side buttresses.”¹¹⁸ With this analysis, it can be seen that in the Jockey Club these categories, transformed into project concepts, were used in a more powerful way.

On the other hand, in the first ten years of Paulo Mendes da Rocha's professional career (1958-1967), there is a continuous research around certain spatial and construction/formal solutions that are tested and perfected, in order to obtain the desired spatial fluidity. In this sense, it can be said that in the Jockey Club project the “transverse approach” design solution is consolidated. When comparing the Goiás Jockey Club and the Guarujá Waterfront

Club, that are of similar programmatic categories and adopt the same architectural parti, in the Jockey Club can be seen a spatial complexity originating from the definition of levels, half levels and access platforms to the internal areas, that is not present in the Guarujá project.

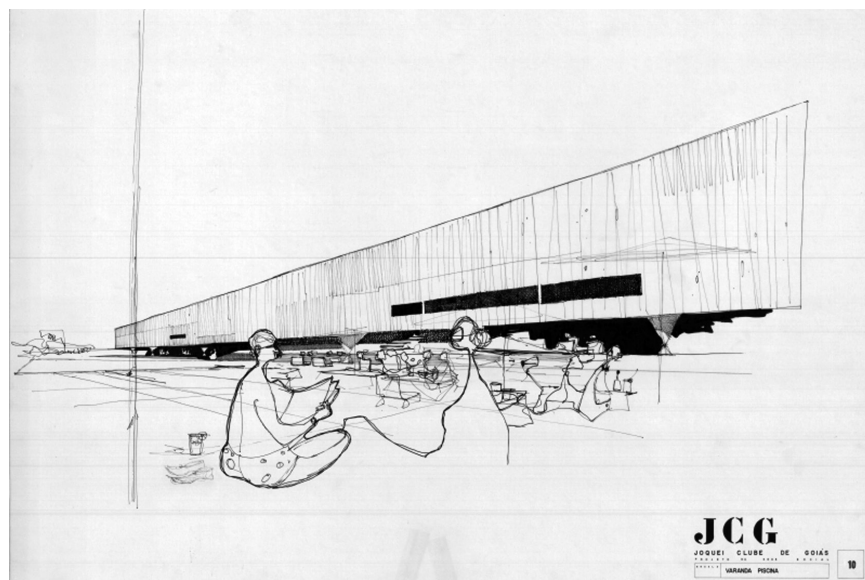
Through this internal, private street, one penetrates through a tunnel directly into the building's internal space. The restaurant and the party room are connected to the external space, on the face of the wooded park, (...) The square of the swimming pools penetrates as a covered space (...) over the party room, (...) To the more reserved activities, game, reading and deliberative activities, was destined for the last floor, (...) the gymnasium has differentiated access for the general public directly from Rua 3 to the party room. The building divides the land and its internal space serves as a link between the two resulting areas, the pool square, and the park.¹⁹

The internal area is fluid and interconnected by ramps and half-levels, is well ventilated and illuminated, mixing the social and sport sectors, compensating an existing gap between *Rua 3* and *Avenida Anhanguera*, in the longitudinal direction of the site. The program is distributed over the four levels, resulting in a large horizontal plane that shapes the building as a large “covered square.”

Another highlight of the architect's authorial trait is the adoption of striking sections, as the design's defining features. The examination of the cross and longitudinal sections already clarifies the elegance of the solution. By choosing the “covered square” as the protagonist of the project, Paulo Mendes da Rocha adopts the concept of coverage that, at the same time, protects and reveals the public character of the spaces.²⁰

The image of shadow, which establishes the character and dimension of the main spaces, also appears in the courtyards of the school projects in São Paulo in the 1960s and in the *Avaré Forum*, the so-called “shadow square”: an appropriate place to wait, as it “creates a very adequate internal climate, with controlled natural light and the desired shaded atmosphere.”²¹ This image is materialized, in the Jockey Club, from the ribbed slab, from the internal trapezoidal section pillars and from the overhead skylights located in the longitudinal axis of the roof.

Present in many of Paulo Mendes da Rocha's works, the ribbed slab defines the shape and spatiality of the building. The solution of the ribbed slab, the reduced internal vertical supports and the blank end walls



04 Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Jockey Club of Goiás, Goiânia, Brazil, 1962-1964. East facade and pool square. © Paulo Mendes de Rocha Collection, Casa da Arquitectura, Matosinhos.

present in the Jockey Club, were also used in the Guarujá Waterfront Club.²² The experience with the Jockey and its constructional solution provided the basis for the study of a grid of delicate proportion, despite its materiality in *beton brut*.

In the project, the care with the tectonic elements, especially the ribbed slab and the prismatic pillars, is called to attention. Generous cantilevered areas correspond to the interface with the external areas, allowing the entrance of natural light. The reinforced and prestressed concrete structure has a section with a central span of 38 meters (m) and external cantilevers of 16 m, making up 5,000 m² of projection and total constructed area of 15,000 m². The building measures 47 m wide by 103 m long and 6.9 m height, from the level of the pools. The two main beams of the roof coincide with the alignment of the pillars, working as transition beams and as gutters. The structural slim blank cantilevered end walls further extend the facades. They have a height of 4.70 m and provide a continuous split in the building's lateral roof.

This large shaded roof, associated with zenithal skylighting elements, is present in many of Paulo Mendes da Rocha's works designed in the first years of his career, with different solutions applied in each case. At the Faculty of Philosophy, a similar one to the Jockey Club's zenithal skylighting appears.²³ The zenithal ventilation and lighting of the changing rooms and the Jockey Club's service sector, achieved through a small crack along the side support, is also present at the São José dos Campos School Group and at the

Faculty of Philosophy.²⁴

The pillars are one of the most expressive elements of the project. Composed of trapezoidal sections divided into three parts (a truncated pyramid base, a central pyramid transition section and an inverted pyramidal capital), such pillars demonstrate the concern with the lightness of the structural elements, which vary in cross section according to the structural loads. Such columns are present in his work since the Paulistano Athletic Club Gymnasium project.

In the focal analysis of the isolated elements, one observes the design and the proportions applied, bringing the image of a mature result for a young architect at the beginning of his career. In the case of the Jockey Club these elements acquire a solution of ingenuity and sophistication in relation to the whole of the work,²⁵ constituting the basis of a greater search, associated with the creation of a transparent internal space defined essentially by the incidence of light and shadow.

This space is integrated with the swimming pool square and to the courtyard of the park by means of doors with revolving frames and steel cable bracing. The notion of inside and outside, in this case is quite subtle. By opting for the separation of environments by means of levels and interconnected by ramps and walkways, connected to a sophisticated system of pillar, beam and slab, the architect achieves a spatial fluidity not present in his previous works.

The continuous research around a spatial system and constructional elements in the first years of Paulo Mendes da Rocha's work, is reflected in his future production, like the great horizontal plane suspended by few sup-

ports existing in the Hotel in Poxoréu (1971), in the *Núcleo de Educação Jardim Calux* [Jardim Calux Primary School] in São Bernardo do Campo (1976), in the *Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo* [Museum of Contemporary Art, University of São Paulo] (1975) and in the *Museu de Arte de Vitória* [Art Museum in Vitória] (1991); or the expressive spaces of the *Museu da Escultura* [Sculpture Museum] (1988), to mention some examples.

Conclusions

The detailed analysis of the project of the Jockey Club of Goiás reveals a surprise, a premature maturity for a young architect, in the first decade of his professional work. In it, a consistent formal synthesis is already observed, characteristic of his forthcoming work, which presents itself as an aesthetic result of “his way of understanding the historical reality of his time and, consequently, the criteria that determine his performance over it,” as Hélio Piñon²⁶ points out.

The dialectic relationship between the building and the environment seems to be part of Paulo Mendes da Rocha’s initial gestures, overcoming the challenges of the place with lessons of urban setting and insertion in the landscape. Risking the “transverse” design approach in the Jockey Club’s project (to

which he attributed the victory of the contest) would have been one of the decisions that would be revisited in the coming decades.

In an interview about his projects in Goiânia, in 1988, the architect observed that the Jockey Club – as an urban club – would be located on a valuable site and that, with time, it could be pressured by the growth of the city. At the time, he anticipated that the facilities “would be a very beautiful exception for the city” if kept in the same place, and stated that with such a space, it could receive future interventions with complementary uses to its original purpose.²⁷ In fact, the club functioned as a social catalyst, where parties, games, tournaments and leisure took place until the late 1990s. However, the building is nowadays abandoned, in a state of accelerated degradation, awaiting intervention actions that will guarantee its use and its permanence in time.

Notes

- 1 See Hugo Segawa, “Arquitetos peregrinos, nômades e migrantes”, in Hugo Segawa (org.), *Arquiteturas no Brasil, anos 80*, São Paulo, Editora Projeto, 1988, 9-13.
- 2 Planned in 1933 by Attilio Correia Lima (1901-1943), under the precepts of the French school of scientific urbanism.
- 3 The Jockey Club of Goiás (1962), the Bento Odilon Moreira residence (1963), the Serra Dourada Stadium (1974-1975) and the Goiânia Bus Terminal (1983-1986) as a consultant.
- 4 Paulo Mendes da Rocha, “Entrevista concedida a Christine Ramos Mahler, São Paulo, 1988”, in Christine Ramos Mahler, *Aspectos da Modernidade na Cidade de Goiânia. (1950-1960)*, Goiânia, Master Thesis, Instituto Goiano de Pré-História e Antropologia, Universidade Católica de Goiás, 2004, 139.
- 5 According to an article published in the magazine *AB Arquitetura do Brasil*, the presidency of the competition was in charge of architect Jon Maitrejean (1929-). See “Jóquei Clube de Goiás”, *AB Arquitetura do Brasil*, No. 11 – Esporte e Lazer, São Paulo, 1979, 20.
- 6 See Rosa Artigas, *Paulo Mendes da Rocha*, São Paulo, Editora Cosac & Naify, 2002, 225.
- 7 Paulo Mendes da Rocha, in Christine Ramos Mahler, *op. cit.*, 139.
- 8 This last project in partnership with Waldemar Herrmann (1937-).
- 9 See Hélio Piñon, *Paulo Mendes da Rocha*, São Paulo, Romano Guerra Editora, 2002, 8.
- 10 Paulo Mendes da Rocha, “Depoimento”, *Acrópole*, No. 342, São Paulo, year XXIX, 1967, 15.
- 11 Goiânia has a significant Art Deco heritage declared in 2003, at the national level. The region where the Jockey Club is located is registered in the map, having a historical dimension to be considered.
- 12 According to Rosa Artigas, *op. cit.*, 124.
- 13 Term used by Eline Caixeta and José Artur Frota in “Paisagens Desoladas: quatro Máscaras de Concreto em Deriva”, when dealing with the four works of Paulo Mendes da Rocha built in Goiânia. In Carlos Eduardo Comas, Marta Peixoto, Sérgio Moacir Marques (org.), *Concreto: Plasticidade e*

Industrialização na Arquitetura do Cone Sul-Americano 1930-70, Porto Alegre, Editora UniRitter, 2010, 161.

- 14 *Idem*.
- 15 Eline Caixeta, José Artur Frota, *op. cit.*, 163.
- 16 Paulo Mendes da Rocha, in Christine Ramos Mahler, *op. cit.*, 142.
- 17 *Acrópole*, *op. cit.*, 18 and 26.
- 18 Rosa Artigas, *op. cit.*, 40.
- 19 *Acrópole*, *op. cit.*, 34.
- 20 The club was designed for an average daily attendance of 2,000 members, at the time a considerable volume of people for an urban club headquarters.
- 21 *Acrópole*, *op. cit.*, 26.
- 22 Ana Elisa Moraes Souto, *Projeto arquitetônico e a relação com o lugar nas obras de Paulo Mendes da Rocha (1958-2000)*, Porto Alegre, PhD Thesis, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Vol. 11, 2009, 23.
- 23 *Acrópole*, *op. cit.*, 30-32.
- 24 *Idem*. 23 and 30-32.
- 25 Regarding the solution given to the design of the Jockey Club pillars, perhaps the closest kinship is in the pillar section of the 1962 Faculty of Philosophy of the University of São Paulo. See *idem*, 30-32.
- 26 Hélio Piñon, *op. cit.*, 7.
- 27 Christine Ramos Mahler, *op. cit.*, 141.

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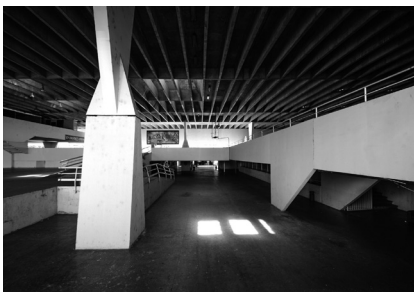
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05 Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Jockey Club of Goiás, Goiânia, Brazil, 1962-1975. Access tunnel, Gymnasium on the right and Party Room on the left. © José Artur D’Aló Frota, 2012, JADF Collection.



06 Paulo Mendes da Rocha, Jockey Club of Goiás, Goiânia, Brazil, 1962-1975. Gymnasium and access ramps. © José Artur D’Aló Frota, 2012, JADF Collection.