Brazilian Modernism, National Identity and the Santos Dumont Airport: Preserving an Early Aviation Gem
Sabine van Riel

Abstract

Although several written works exist that detail the history of airline expansion in Latin America, none discuss at length the built aviation heritage of this vast continent. This thesis attempts to fill this gap with the discussion of one significant airport which retains three terminals of the pre-jet age, as a contribution to Historic Preservation discourse. The airport discussed here is the Santos Dumont Airport in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Although a brief discussion of the expansion of civil aviation in Latin America was necessary to establish the significance of the extremely dynamic period that was the 1920s, 30s and 40s, this thesis focuses on the built heritage from this period, using the Santos Dumont as an example.

Chapter 1 narrates the geopolitical context of the airline expansion and airport construction in Latin America, with particular emphasis on Brazil. Chapter 2 discusses the architectural and cultural climate in Brazil in the 1930s and 40s. Chapter 3 establishes the importance of the Santos Dumont Airport, as a site with great interest to Brazil’s quest for a national identity in the one hundred years that followed the country’s independence from Portugal. Chapter 4 narrates the architectural significance, construction and preservation of the three passenger terminals at the Santos Dumont Airport, the Pan Am/Panair do Brasil Terminal (1935-37) attributed to Delano & Aldrich, the Santos Dumont Hydroplane Terminal (1937-38) by Atílio Corrêa Lima and the Santos Dumont Main Passenger Terminal (1937-47) by the prolific firm Roberto Brothers. The conclusion analyses current Brazilian preservation policy and existing proposals for the Santos Dumont Airport expansion. The conclusion also presents a set of recommendations for the preservation of the Santos Dumont Airport site as a historic district.