

Work camps at Aramitan



I was suddenly filled with nostalgia? Everyone had left the house to go to a small celebration at nearby Arapoty. I would lock up and then go myself. Our last evening... Why had I become so attached to this place? It was not mine, nor would I ever live and work here. But it represented so much: so many ideals and experiences, so much lifeblood put into the work; such wonderful groups of people that I had come to

know – a whole lot of life to suddenly leave behind, returning to my accustomed surroundings in Switzerland.

We had said farewell to our 2 builders, Gerson and Edivaldo, and to Madalena from across the road, who cooked our meals, shopped and played mother to all of us. Despite the language barriers, contact to them had become increasingly warm and close.

It had not been an easy adjustment to Brazilian conditions and particularly to Brazilian building methods and materials.

Right: *The washing machine on the left was one of the first things we installed. There was no built-in earth leakage. When I inquired about that, I was told to take a wire from the apparatus and bang it into the wall with a nail. Not a bad solution, taken in all...*



While food is generally accepted to be an important factor in cultural life and many people practically define a culture by its cuisine (readers excepted, of course), the other side of the coin is everything that has to do with kitchens and bathrooms – and here we come up against local conditions as distinct as anything we take in.

Who would have believed that every Sao Paulo house has a *cold-water tank* in the roof to provide the required water pressure, and that the fewest houses have a hot water geyser? In most countries, we are used to connecting straight to the city mains

water supply and to hot and cold taps at every outlet. Dishes in the kitchen here are generally washed with cold water and the showers have a head that heats the water internally. Never seen one of those before!

Funny thing... I was deeply involved with toilets and water systems. After all, they were one of the things we were here to build. In fact, until we did, we could not use them. Brazilian food is very easy to adapt to, with a vast variety of dishes, (apart from the ubiquitous beans and rice) always beautifully prepared.

But the toilets! My God, I had no idea this was such an object of habit. They are just a little too low, the seats take on variety of different artistic forms, the worst being rectangular with marginally rounded corners, and all of them seem to dig in in just the wrong places. This moves several suppliers of seats to pad them with soft plastic – a considerate, but wholly misguided treatment of the symptoms. I am accustomed to an adequate supply of literature in my bathroom to keep me occupied, but get in; get out is definitely the motto here.

What about the inner workings of the system? Even a cursory glance at what is written on the Internet about touring Brazil informs you that putting toilet paper down the loo causes blockages and could strain your welcome at your Hospitality Club host.



Left: This is a Brazilian bend in a sewerage piping system. It is afterwards covered by a concrete lid. Access is easy, but so are blockages

It is a question of philosophy. A little complicated technically, but intellectually fairly basic. Here in Brazil the premise is that you have to build a system that allows you to readily access any blockage and remove it by taking it out. So each junction or corner has a box with a lid, the pipes at the bottom coming in on one side and another pipe exiting on the other. The bottom is covered with cement nicely rounded to direct the flow. A large proportion of all toilets wobble, as they are attached to the floors by 2 screws. I am amazed that any of them hold at all as you can knock an ordinary wire nail straight into the concrete floors.

Where I come from, the philosophical premise is a different one. What goes down must not be allowed to come up again! It remains in a sealed system where pipes are scientifically inclined to allow for optimal flow, no drain may be covered up without the sanction of a health inspector and access is there purely to insert a rod. Should something go really wrong, a specialist is called who charges a whack of money, and so is to be avoided at all costs. It is generally considered to be pretty bad karma to have more than one or two such blockages in a lifetime.

Showers also become an issue. Mains electricity supply in Brazil is generally 110 Volts - but not always. They have an ingenious system of upgrading to 220 when need be, endangering all appliances not fitted to receive it. But try showering with a

110-v supply?! You turn on the tap and the lights go dim! Then, after a minute of adjusting the flow, you finally get a lukewarm trickle requiring a bold decision to spend the next 15 minutes trying to remove some of the dirt from your person in the winter cold. (Heating the house is no option here). But 220 volts can produce a steady flow of warm water reducing the process to half the time... always limited, of course, by the pressure you get from the tank in the roof.

We built a couple of such bathrooms and installed a water tank in the attic. Here was another big surprise! I was preparing to go in through the roof, but the builders took a big hammer and began to knock a huge hole straight through the wall. I was agog... eventually seeing the logic, as your Brazilian brick is a light, airy little number which you can practically cut with a kitchen knife. It doesn't have to carry any weight. Load bearing is all done by a framework of reinforced concrete pillars and beams, a bit like the half-timbered houses of Europe.

So, these being the conditions, we had to adapt. Was it easy? Not on your life! What tools we had broke readily, the supervising foreman spoke only Portuguese, there were no architectural plans – not a drawing in sight - and the nearest town with supplies was 40 minutes walk away - unless you managed to jump on a freight train.

But we also had so much going for us. We were tackling all this as a group and were not going to let such things get us down. We bought a large number of tools, which kept us in work and would also provide some extra resources for the project in the future. We developed a relationship with a few local taxi drivers, who knew where we were and if we said the word “Aramitan” would arrive at the door or take someone there on our behalf. Most of the time we walked, but this was a useful back-up, especially if we had to go into town to get supplies.

We were also particularly fortunate to each time have dedicated and caring interpreters – the first time Paula Schmidt-Hebbel from the 11th class of the Waldorf school in SP, and the second time Oliver Tump, both of whom cared for everyone on the camp and organised trips and other events on our behalf.

We had a wonderful cook and also our Brazilian partners saw to it that we had the occasional festive meal in the evening. Gradually, over the weeks, a mutual respect and warm understanding developed between us and the 2 builders, quite apart from the feeling of community between the participants that became stronger and stronger with each passing day's work.

On the weekend excursions, it was possible to at least glimpse some of the wondrous natural beauty that Brazil is famous for. I come from a country famous for its beaches, so the sea was nothing new, but the atmosphere in the small coastal towns and the stunning bays, secluded inlets and views onto the islands beyond opened a whole world where life was relaxed and adapted to the moods of nature.

It was also remarkable how the mood and experience of Connectivity affected the participants in the second work camp. Where in the first one we all had to get to know one another and the individual values were often quite divergent, after the conference everyone seemed to know why we were there, relationship and understanding was immediate.

I am also grateful for the relationship that came about to the Monte Azul project and particularly to Ute Craemer. They are the organisation administering the ongoing building work and the Aramitan local finances, and so with humanity and integrity so that one can feel a real support and back-up in those little instances where something goes wrong – a minor accident, communication problems and so on.

For details of the jobs we undertook and completed, see the lists with small images also available for download.

A big hug and a big thank you to all who took part and will, I am sure, still remain in contact with one another in the years to come.

Eric Hurner