

Brasilia: Drifting Radical Modernity

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The aim of the organizers of the XIX Congress of the International Union of Architects is to reflect and debate the contributions which architecture — and architects — can make to the present situation of cities. The purpose is to consider the changes which have taken place in the context of the transformation of today's cities. Besides examining the new conditions determined by the present-day metropolitan situation, we intend to analyze the gap between our architectural culture, dating from the beginning of the twentieth century, and the factual situation of our cities.

In addition to that, we, in Latin America sometimes find ourselves in a very uncomfortable situation. Many concepts that we currently use to speak about our cities are not only unsuited to the present-day situation but stem from the European experience of cities. With this dual anomalous circumstance, in the absence of a critical point of view, we might assume that our cities are evil, for they don't match the external, European categories we are misleadingly using to analyze them. On the other hand, America is a by-product of Europeans, Africans, Asians and aborigines, a melting-pot of races and cultures. Because of the fact that we live in a more and more globalized world, it is important to have a cosmopolitan way of thinking about questions that are common to everyone.

In America, we are the heirs of the Modern Movement. Our cities are modern cities. Regardless of whether they have historical cores, they are clearly twentieth-century cities and their life is still affected, for good or evil, by modern urban planning rules and contradictions. So, it would not be wise for us to cast aside their achievements, although the most powerful dream of modern architecture, namely, to radically transform the world through modern cities, seems odd to our present sensibilities. But we have to recognize that the modern city can't be accepted strictly in the way it was proposed by the avant-garde architects of the beginning of the twentieth century; and that modern cities are very different from the theories that constructed their concept. Living under the rules of the modern city, we have to separate the wheat from the tares, avoiding both the sentimental rejection and the engaged acceptance, but trying to review concepts of the modern city in a critical way. It is not an easy task, but could be valuable to find suitable new paths. To exemplify my ideas about these contradictory gaps — architectural culture and today's cities; European concepts and Latin American cities; modern city theories and practice — I'll make some considerations about the city of Brasilia.

Brasilia, the capital city of Brazil, was planned and built between 1956-60 as the embodiment of Modernist ideals about the city. If Brasilia had remained a dream, it would have been only a local incident of modern architecture and the modern city's past with no further interest. But Brasilia is not a dream, and it is certainly not a nightmare. It is a living city, in constant growth and transformation, struggling between a fixed scheme of modernity and everyday

necessities. The aim of my essay is not to make a complete critical appreciation of Brasilia past and present. I'm not going to write about it as a failure or as a success, but as a model that has been reformulated by circumstances but with no critical revision by architects; as an image that was, and still is, emulated by other Brazilian cities, in the absence of a critical revision and of a better design.

We disdain Brasilia; nevertheless, it stands as a lively, strong, model which has not been re-examined. It has been neglected during the last decades, even by most Brazilian architects, but not for the same reasons that have put it out of fashion internationally, cursed by the rejection of the fifties, the prejudices of the sixties, and the critical revisions of modern architecture in the seventies. To architects, Brasilia is a frozen image of the past, and we know very little about it.

I agree with Norma Evenson when she says, in her comprehensive book about two Brazilian capitals, formerly Rio de Janeiro and presently Brasilia, that "to be appreciated, Brasilia must be taken on its own terms."¹

It is widely known that Brasilia provided one of the first opportunities for a comprehensive application of the principles of the Modern Movement to the design of a major city. The birth of the concepts of modern cities can be traced to the nineteenth century, but it is Le Corbusier's visionary schemes and CIAM's doctrine that mostly influentially synthesize the modernist concepts of urban design. Eventually, most modern architects began to share a set of common concepts: the city as a unified work of design, conceived in terms of functional zoning, networks of traffic, and high-density social housing. All these ideas were being applied to new-town building and housing estates after the Second World War in Europe; but the scope of Brasilia was then unique, due to its scale and importance as a new national capital.

There was a national competition to choose the project. All participants entered very similar plans, conceptually speaking: general schemes, diagrams illustrating theories of urban design without further application of any knowledge about real Brazilian cities. But the question was not only to build a new city, but a new national capital, understood as a radically different city; a utopian example impregnated with the social compromises of modern architecture. The jury, which included three foreign urbanists and three Brazilian architects, stated that a capital city should "express the grandeur of a nationwide desire, [and that] it should differ from other cities of half a million inhabitants."² Rejecting the projects that had "no capital character," the jury decided that "the project which best integrates the monumental elements into the city's daily life as a Federal Capital, and which is presented as a rational, essentially urban composition — in fact a work of art — is the one submitted by Lucio Costa."³

In his proposition, Costa modestly claimed that the idea of Brasilia came to him almost involuntarily, as a complete picture, but one he had not sought. To base a major urban plan on a sudden inspiration may seem a drastic violation of all currently accepted design tenets. But Lucio Costa was not at all an intuitive architect. With a solid education at the National School of Fine Arts in Rio de Janeiro, after some years he became engaged in the neo-colonialist trend during the twenties. His subsequent reaction against the eclecticism and historicism of the beaux-arts practice made him the leader of Brazilian modern architecture of the thirties and forties. In spite of that, he didn't see modern architecture as a complete break with the past. Costa's foundation article, "Reasons for the New Architecture" (1934) presented Le Corbusier as the legitimate heir of the academic tradition. Brasilia is a conception of a first-rate thinker, architect, and urbanist, and his so-called "intuition" can be more appropriately understood as his skillfulness and deep concern about modernity and the past, new ideas and traditional procedures.⁴ Brasilia is not a planner's city; as Costa noted in his proposition, Brasilia would not be the result of regional planning, but the cause of it.

Beyond the revision of his plan Costa took little part in the creation of the city. But that did not change much of Brasilia's destiny, for he stated its foundational concepts in a simple but apologetical way. Although suffering some modifications as well as a number of additions, the overall conception was applied in a relatively static way, in an effort to maintain the "purity" of the plan at all cost. And yet, it was increasingly evident, as time passed by and the city began to deal with the changing necessities of daily life, that a more comprehensive and flexible interpretation of the scheme was needed, even though the essence of the pilot plan would be maintained. That struggle between fixed ideals of modernity — at least, a sort of modernity — and the growing necessity for change, converts Brasilia into a very interesting landmark for a revision of the models of modern cities.

However, Brasilia became known to the world not as an urban design, but mainly as an architectural image. The freely expressive variety of forms celebrated as the most interesting characteristic of modern Brazilian architecture of the thirties and forties, was radically transformed, in Brasilia, by the effort to give its architecture a monumental character. Brasilia's monumentality is the result of Costa's beliefs about the role of modern architecture in building an appropriate present for his country, and the development of Oscar Niemeyer's experiences with the design of the government buildings — contrasting some standardized building types with special ones — sketched with dramatic sculptural abstract forms, with a more strict adherence to the visual qualities of the International Style, rather dominant in the fifties.

While Niemeyer had been greatly influenced by Le Corbusier and Lucio Costa at the beginning of his career, by the time he designed the main public buildings of Brasilia he was at a turning point in his professional activities; as he said, in a "step characterized by a constant search for brevity and purity, [...] interested in compact solutions, simple and geometric, [and] the fitness of unity and harmony amongst the buildings."⁵

The monumentality of Brasilia was subjected to considerable debate. Although it was not at all a recent discussion, the search for monumentality in modern architecture gained momentum after the Second World War. Modern architects condemned traditional styles and were viscerally against the idea of providing a set of symbols for monumentality — perhaps because of a lack of opportunities. Before the Second World War, modern architecture was still not officially accepted, and the thirties saw a continuation of revivalism in government buildings, with such diverse patrons as Roosevelt in Washington, Hitler in Berlin, and Stalin in Moscow, that supported massive building programs characterized by the classical style.

This also happened during the Vargas era, in the thirties, in Brazil; but although not exclusive or yet dominant, modern architecture also received important sponsoring from the federal government. The Ministry of Education and Health building, built in Rio de Janeiro between 1937-1945, provided an isolated, but very important, example of modern design applied to a government building, highly praised by critics.

With their novel forms and visual drama, Niemeyer's government buildings tended to attract most of the critical attention. Kenneth Frampton complains that "the initial exuberance of Brazilian Modern Architecture would hold the seeds of such a decadent formalism," and tries to explain that breach as "the affirmation of an inexorable form against pitiless nature, since beyond the order of Brasilia's capital, bordered by an artificial lake, there was the infinite expanse of the jungle."⁶

Such a romantic image is quite impregnated with prejudices and deceptions. Niemeyer's designs are not a primal undertaking to give order to chaos, but an attempt to give monumental character to governmental buildings, whether we agree with the results or not. The artificial lake was not a proud affirmation over nature similar to Versailles but a reservoir, a basic necessity on a site where there is little water; and the jungle — or better, the rain forest — lies a thousand kilometers from Brasilia.

Manfredo Tafuri says that Brasilia, "born from demagogic intentions, in the middle of the jungle (again, the jungle) is guided by a childish allegoric plan, that tries to reinterpret an urban model already experimented with in the Soviet Union in the thirties" — this is all he states about Brasilia's urban design. He says that "Niemeyer showed [there] the limitations of his poetic, that became a common *maniera* repeated ad nauseam [...] with spectacular, but superfluous fancy."⁷ Maybe he is right.

These and other images from the canonical books and magazine articles, passed down by generations of architectural critics, generally confuse Lucio Costa's urban design and Oscar Niemeyer's architecture, the search for monumentality appropriate to a capital city, and the criticism of a particular architectural style helping to create the idea that Brasilia was a total failure. It is even a common idea between Brazilian architects.

In spite of that, we seldom see a consequent criticism of Brasilia.⁸ Perhaps Brasilia was forgotten because it was a great disappointment to modern architects. Although created to fulfill the modernist ideals, to exemplify a new future to the nation, to change the social situation of Brazil's people, and to transform and modernize Brazilian society, through architecture and urban design; once built, factual Brasilia was not the imagined city, but a commonplace city, suffering the same problems of any other city, and by no means radically changing society, for "it was a quite different society that built and occupied Brasilia," i.e., the real Brazilian society.

Even though, I can't label Brasilia as a total failure, for I also did not trust it as a total accomplishment of all modernity's beliefs. Brasilia is neither a marvelous idea that was perverted by reality nor it is a forgettable effort, an outmoded conception of modernity with nothing to learn from it. On the contrary, Brasilia's contradictions are crucial to understand modern Brazilian architecture's further developments, but more than that, Brasilia is a very interesting example of the drifting of the utopian ideals of modern cities. That's why I believe we have much to learn from Brasilia.

Despite that, as James Holston points out, the contradictions of present day Brasilia are much more complex than the opposition between the imagined utopia and the existent order.⁹ To understand that better, a more circumstantial analysis would be necessary, and that can't be done here.

Brasilia is not only the pilot urban plan and monumental architecture. Brasilia is far from being a perfect city, with perfect everyday people with no existential problems living in it, like in the dreams of

the masters of modern cities — but in fact, it is quite a good city to live in. Brasilia is not only what a tourist sees when visiting it, but also an extensive metropolitan area, as lively and interesting as the pilot plan itself. In this sense, it is a common city. But at the same time, it is more than that. It was converted into a myth, and into a taboo; but still serves as a current model to “organize” and to “rule” our cities, due to the weight of inertia of modernist beliefs and procedures in the daily practice of architects.

The gap between architectural culture and the factual situation of today’s cities and the drifting between the modernist concepts that were used to create it, and the contradictions of its performance, can be appreciated in Brasilia in a very clear way. Brasilia didn’t succeed in changing society, but in a certain way it anticipated some of the transformations of society that brought us nowadays to metropolitan situations quite similar to Brasilia’s reality. Choosing Brasilia as the subject of my essay, I hope we can find a way to review it as a rich and contradictory example of transformation and mutation, not only to state new paths for our theories, but to help us architects to understand better our present-day modern cities, especially if we intend to continue our roles as city builders.

NOTES

- ¹ Norma Evanson, *Two Brazilian Capitals, Architecture and Urbanism in Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 104.
- ² An English translation of the jury’s report is published in *Módulo 8*, Rio de Janeiro (July 1957): 18.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ Carlos Eduardo Comas, “Context and Modernity,” *Annals of the Seminary at the Technical School of Architecture, Delft*, 1990.
- ⁵ Oscar Niemeyer, “Testimony,” *Módulo 9*, Rio de Janeiro (February 1958): 3-5.
- ⁶ Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson); Spanish version: *Historia crítica de la Arquitectura Moderna* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1987), p. 260.
- ⁷ Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dalco, *Storia dell’architettura Contemporanea II* (Milano: Electra, 1979), p. 337.
- ⁸ The best recent book on that subject is by the American anthropologist James Holston, *A Cidade Modernista Uma Crítica de Brasília e sua Utopia* (Sao Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1993); original title: *The Modernist City. An Anthropological Critique of Brasilia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
- ⁹ James Holston, *op.cit.*, p. 105.