

The Photographic Suppression of Reality: Re-presenting Brasilia

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To Brasilia, the not-seen but much heard-of, projected in the air with fingers as long as searchlight beams, images of the future thrown onto clouds, blueprints hanging in the blue on hooks of stars, endless garlands of city plans, unwanted but being done, done, done. Not because of, but in spite of. Neither by dictatorship nor democracy but by inspiration.¹

For the majority of people, Brasilia is known solely through photographic representations of its modern architecture. A preponderance of pristine images of the monumental sculptural forms of its ministries, government complexes, hotels, superblocks and other facilities are to be found in popular and trade magazines, academic journals, history books and travel brochures alike. The towers, bowls and blocks have equally monumental names to convey their grandness: Plaza of the Three Powers, Alvorada Palace, Dawn Palace, North Wing Superblock, South Wing Superblock. Most North American photographs are aerial and axial views, cropped to exclude or without reference to landscape or habitation; they are images which reinforce the abstraction of grand concepts and a sense of distance, both literal and figurative, from human concerns and day-to-day existence and activities.

By far, the most popular view of this city, envisioned by planner Lucio Costa more as a national symbol than as an ideal city, is that of the National Congress Complex. In these photographs, the two towers of the National Legislature and the adjacent high-rise Secretariat – the visual focus of the monumental axis – are balanced by the shallow dome of the Senate Chamber and the inverted dome of the Hall of Deputies. A few images of this sculptural massing include the human figure, always two people walking together, an image which reinforces the formal symmetry of the double tower and the extraordinary scale of the sculptural forms. Unlike classical architecture in which the architectural elements are proportioned in reference to the human body, this form of modernism, though often referred to as “classical,” is represented as monumental, bearing little or no apparent relation to human form or proportion, either in terms of scale or of viewpoint.

Brasilia’s architect, Oscar Niemeyer believed that his architecture should be visionary and poetic, not “limited by rules and regulations which leave no room for fantasy, for deviation, for contradiction of the functional principles they adopt.”² He chose concrete as a building material because he felt that it is a structural material that could express the plasticity of form he sought. As conveyed in the photographs, human scale is not the issue, instead, the issue is the unlimited liberty of forms:

I favor an almost unlimited liberty of forms, a liberty by no means subservient to the reasons of technique or function but acting, first of all, as a challenge to imagination, to the creation of modern and beautiful forms that may astonish and convey

emotions because of their beauty and their embodied creative genius; a liberty that permits, whenever desirable, a mood of ecstasy, of dreams, of poetry. Of course such a liberty cannot be used indiscriminately. In metropolitan areas, for example, I am in favor of its limitations, or rather of maintaining unity and harmony of ensembles rejecting all solutions which, though beautiful and on a high architectural level, do not fit in with the plastic entity.³

Not only are people rarely included in these images: in fact there is a notable absence of any indication of the “messiness of everyday living.” The self-built squatters’ housing, legal satellite cities and worker housing where “life” occurs are seldom depicted, though they are where the majority of the population of Brasilia lives. Neither Costa’s Master Plan nor Novacap’s early directives anticipated the creation of satellite cities in the Federal District. Instead, the capital city was intended to accommodate 500,000 people by the year 2000 with no illegal peripheral of working class poverty. The Master Plan stressed that “the growth of squatter settlements whether on the city outskirts or in the surrounding countryside, should at all costs be prevented.”⁴ Legal satellite cities, rising between 1957 and 1967 and located miles outside the city itself, at the end of dusty roads were constructed for many of the Brazilians who worked to construct Brasilia. Photographic depictions of these settlements, both legal and illegal, unlike the “portraits” of the capital, capture a life that is full of detail, texture, and human interaction.

Brasilia was thought to be an irradiation of regional development, but it became the opposite, a pole of attraction. The geoeconomic region of Brasilia, formed by 86 municipalities, was confronted with an abrupt change in its development pattern with the increase of poverty, change in land tenure and total dependency...in terms of services, facilities and employment possibilities. The municipalities...were suddenly confronted with the phenomenon of suburbanization...a fast and continuous transformation of rural land into urban land subdivision projects, the expulsion of small farmers, the disappearance of small-sized rural properties and landless unskilled workers living under extremely poor conditions in the urban centres of the region.⁵

Contradictions abound in Brasilia – between the wealthy and the impoverished, the built and natural environments, modern metropolis and temporary towns which resemble backdrops in a Hollywood western film, an abundance of spaces and not enough places, and the coexistence of over two hundred religions (many of which incorporate a belief in occult cosmic forces) within an urban environment composed primarily of major monuments built of concrete. Frederick Kiesler, on his visit to Brasilia under construction in September,

1959 observed and eloquently described in his journal the disjunction between the ideal and the reality of Brasilia in context. It is one of the few contemporary descriptions of Brasilia that conveys context and the impact of the new capital on its surroundings and local population. He describes *Cidade Livre*, one of the worker settlements as follows:

The stalagmites of new Brasilia are solidifying from the muddy concrete. Many buildings are still full of holes; steel lace in continuous construction. They rise mute into the night sky, burying the secrets of their future in the hollows of their spaces. The earth of Brasilia is dead silent. Not a soul anywhere. Up in the air, workers balance their way among electric bulbs on the beams of these building cages.

But where are the rest of the forty thousand construction workers who are building this giant new capital?

Oh, I was answered, "the workers live in their own town, three quarters of an hour away. They built it by hand. They refused to live in the prefabricated molehills provided by industry. They prefer shacks with the draft and rain coming through the improvised joints. They baptized it *Cidade Livre* – Free City.

These contradictions are reflected, reinforced, eradicated or ignored, as the images are disseminated through the medium of photography. The photographic suppression of the architecture is, in fact, a reflection of the greater suppression of Brasilia's rich and heterogenous society. As Susan Sontag observes in her book, *On Photography*, a photograph is always potentially a means of control and "a powerful instrument for depersonalizing our relation to the world." The pristine images of the capital, its monuments and axes, superblocks and plazas are carefully constructed compositions, dramatic and impersonal. Most of the views are framed and cropped to eliminate or change context, authorship, habitation, human scale or interaction. The buildings, not man or landscape, are the subject, the literal and symbolic heart of this universe.

...photographs do more than redefine the stuff of ordinary experience...(they) add vast amounts of material that we never see at all...the photographic exploration and duplication of the world fragments continuities and feeds the pieces into an interminable dossier, thereby providing possibilities of control that could not even be dreamed of under the earlier system of recording information: writing.

Several articles written on Brasilia describe the magnificent landscape, the red earth and vast blue skies of a trackless prairie, but few images show this landscape. In most North American photographs of Brasilia, the landscape is a mute bystander to the erection of the poetry of the built environment. An article on Brasilia from *National Geographic* describes how the rains turn the land into a field of brick colored mud and how on dry days the city is smothered with clouds of red dust. Frederick Kiesler also commented poignantly on the beauty and drama of the landscape:

We were full of expectations about what we would see in this dream capital on a plateau-desert in the middle of Brazil. A huge area empty, barren, with clayey earth of pulverized terra cotta red. Columns of red dust arising before the rainy season, we were told, join to form mountain ranges of impenetrable dust clouds, where men and trucks and buildings appear and disappear like ghosts, covered with the breath of the red earth. And then, when the cloudbursts reach this semitropical climate, the dust mixes with the mud of the earth, making knee-deep porridge, and all work has to be stopped.

Where are these photographs? Photography is a particularly problematic mode of representation for architecture. One of the most important aspects of built form, that of the experience of the user in the space, cannot be adequately reproduced or approximated in a

twodimensional format. What emerges in most of the photographs of Brasilia is a largely lifeless and scaleless depiction of seemingly uninhabited space. Photographs selected from North American and European presses seem to emphasize the scenographic aspects of the modern composition and leave aside the indigenous influences and local conditions. There are many scales of viewing possible, but the photographs of the city treat Brasilia as a vertical landscape, flattening out its dimensionality in time and space into planar compositions of pure form. These photographs remove the viewer entirely from the urban, cultural, historical and political context of an astonishing architecture. As represented in the majority of these photographs, Brasilia is a city without neighborhoods, a city of "quadrants" devoid of life and aptly named in dehumanizing ways. While no mode of photography can be expected to reproduce the experience of a built work, photography can capture an atmosphere or mood, as does writing:

hypnotized upon the red clay wasteland
of the Brazilian desert
the presidential palace-to-be cantilevers
its roofing and flooring into
a boundless terrace, propped up
by a colonnade of giant spearheads,
compressed shapes of concrete covered with white marble,
plastic symbols of sentinels,
pinpointed up righteousness.

A closer look at a wide variety of sources reveals a richly heterogenous local culture at the city's periphery – in the satellite towns and favelas – represented in photographs which illustrate an entirely different scale of existence and experience. Kiesler's description brings these photographs even more clearly to life:

To the left and to the right were illuminated shacks leaning against one another, the walls built with planks, metal sheeting, cement blocks; the roofs of corrugated iron covered with old cloth weighted down by concrete rubble. These were shops of one type or another. Along the seemingly endless sidewalk one expected to see hitching posts for horses; instead, there were helter-skelter rows of American jeeps, second and third hand, painted in various colors, converted into travel-toys. To our amazement, on one side of the street we encountered at such a late hour a dense corso of young and old people moving forth and back, singles and whole families, in jolly mood, singing and shouting, not celebrating but just enjoying themselves, mixing their mixed races, Negroid and Indian of Carib and Quechuan descent, Portugese mulatto, women and teenagers, almost every one of bewitching beauty with warm skin, black hair, glowing eyes; rapidly or slowly moving their compact bodies while most of the single men leaned against the walls of the shacks, forming outposts of subversive sex.

The images in Maria de Jesus' diary show life close-up for the most part. We observe people talking, the texture and scale of the street, of shelters; we are close enough to read the signs and the expressions on people's faces. The photographs of the people at home in the settlements, satellites and favelas, have an immediacy and vibrancy to them. Though they depict lives lived in poverty, there is a richness of context and relationship to the environment not found in the vast aerial perspectives and artful compositions of images in the capital itself. When we look at these photographs we feel as Kiesler did when he visited *Cidade Livre*:

I couldn't wait to go into one of the shacks. I longed to meet some of the people. From one shack came the smell of coffee

brew, fish-fry, wine and blood, evoking the palette of Brazil's semi-tropical colors. It was a blend of irresistible seductiveness. I entered. The shop displayed a veritable library of liquor bottles on the shelves and three baby tables and chairs where I could sit down to have a customer's drink. My colleagues strolled on to sightsee. So long brothers!

In contrast to the lifeless depiction of uninhabited spaces that forms the visual lexicon of the capital, these images are suffused with the complex interweaving of detail and impression. Life in the satellite towns and favelas is captured easily in these snapshots. Brasilia, however, does not lend itself to this kind of intimate documentation. With its dehumanizing plazas, large distances between relatively few places (not unlike Le Corbusier's Chandigarh), the fact that the city literally arose in a no-man's land," the priority given to the car over the individual pedestrian, Brasilia is ideally suited to the particular biases of the formal photograph.

When the capital was new it was often referred to as "the end of the world." Looking at the photographs today, they could easily represent a futuristic, post-apocalyptic world devoid of any life-forms. Ironically, this is not an inconceivable image. Two million of the Federal District's 2.5 million people live in the nearby satellite cities. Thirty years after the official inauguration of Brasilia in 1960, members of Congress, federal government ministers, and bureaucrats often still commute home for the weekend. This exodus is facilitated by the provision of free furnished apartments and free air travel both in and out of the city for the bureaucrats for whom Brasilia was built and cocktail parties for the diplomatic corps catered with drinks compliments of the customs service using

liquor seized from the airport. These and other benefits encourage the further removal of the people who run the government from the concerns and daily life of ordinary citizens. Nevertheless, the spirit of optimism with which the city of Brasilia was built is also reflected in the photographs – and we desire to experience it as much for what we do not see in the photographs as for what we do observe.

We learn from looking critically at the images and photographic representations of Brasilia currently available to us. How can we use today's technologies to better communicate the architecture of an environment in ways closer to the scale and rich heterogeneity of human experience? How might a greater sensitivity to multiple viewpoints and issues of scale in visual representation affect the design of cities and our understanding of the identity and form of architecture in the future?

NOTES

- ¹ Frederick Kiesler, *Inside the Endless House: Art, People and Architecture: A Journal* (New York: Sion and Shuster, 1966).
- ² Oscar Niemeyer, "Thoughts on Brasilia," *Brasilia* (1955), p. 21.
- ³ Willy Staubli, *Brasilia*. (London: Leonard Hill Books, 1966).
- ⁴ James Holston, *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasilia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 257.
- ⁵ Claudio C. Acioly, "Incremental Land Development in Brasilia: Can the Urban Poor Escape from Suburbanisation?" *Third World Planning Review* Vol. 16 No. 3 (August 1994): 246.
- ⁶ Kiesler, p. 534.
- ⁷ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* in *The Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Farrar Strauss & Giroux, 1972), p. 167.