

Confluences of the Past in Brasília: Another *Plano Piloto* for Brazilian Modernist Urbanism

One day preceding the inauguration of the new Brazilian capital city, president Juscelino Kubitschek delivered a speech to the workers who had brought up the buildings idealized by Oscar Niemeyer and Lucio Costa. “The brotherhood of those who worked here resembles the building of Middle Age cathedrals,” he said, “when anonymous artists, masters, and apprentices were animated by their faith in God to raise those architectural poems in His honor¹” (47). This association between Brasília and European architectural landmarks was probably alien to the presidential crowd of *candangos* on April 20th 1960, but much of the later scholarship on the city would rely on similar methods.

Planned and built entirely in the five years of Kubitschek’s presidency, Brasília was the result of a long aspiration for Brazilian integration. The city would represent “the materialization of the dreams and desires informing the life of Brazilian people in the 50s—dreams of rupture with archaic political and social structures” (Ceballos 5). The scholarly consensus of the late twentieth century, however, stresses its failure. Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer’s utopian promises of a new Brazil are analyzed as the days of a future past, as modernist ruins. To engage in this discussion, most scholars have viewed the capital’s unique architectural form under the lenses of European Modernism, as its construction was the first time that the abstraction and the social agenda of modernism were applied to the national capital of a major country (Vale 121).

The figure of French architect Le Corbusier, constantly associated with modernist architecture, arises as a valid inspiration for Costa and Niemeyer. As architect Elizabeth Harris puts in her book *Riscos Brasileiros* [Brazilian Sketches], “Le Corbusier traveled the entire world

¹ All the works written in Portuguese are cited in my own translation unless specified.

throughout his career, but in few places he has left such a strong impact as in Brazil” (11). The trio have exchanged letters quite often² and collaborated in projects that include the Brazilian Ministry of Health and Education and the United Nations Headquarter. Despite any similarities, Brasília does not carry Corbusier’s signature. The original plan, often referred to as the Master Plan or *Plano Piloto*, was presented by Costa and Niemeyer in a 1955 public tender that president Kubitschek organized. And, as much as it speaks little to the urban history of the main Brazilian cities, Brasília is by no means the sketch of a *Ville Radieuse*, in Le Corbusier’s standards.

Since the construction of the city, new interpretations of Brazilian modernist architecture have emerged. Those linking Niemeyer and Costa’s work to the Baroque movement or the Jesuit architecture are particularly strong, and have been employed on the analysis of buildings such as the Pampulha Modern Ensemble, in Belo Horizonte, but have remained away from the capital. As schools of thought, the architectural bases that historians, political scientists, anthropologists, or any social scientists choose to write the history of Brasília upon influence their research. In this paper, I analyze the limitations of the Corbusian-centered scholarship produced about Brasília, and discuss the feasibility of adopting alternative and more independent approaches to Brazilian modernist architecture on the study of the capital.

To understand why architectural theory has had an important impact on the study of Brasília, it is striking to consider first the city’s international repercussion. The overall tone with which scholarship produced outside Brazil approaches the capital is that “the founders of Brasília, rather than having planned a city, have actually planned to prevent a city” (Scott 126).

² An extensive collection of the correspondences between Le Corbusier and Brazilian figures such as Oscar Niemeyer and Lúcio Costa can be found in *Le Corbusier e o Brasil*, organized by Santos.

A milestone in the study of Brasília is the 1986 James Holston's monograph *The Modernist City: Architecture, Politics, and Society in Brasília*³. He argues that Brasília's "design and construction were intended as means to create a new age by transforming Brazilian society," but that the utopian premises of the city ultimately "engendered a set of social processes that paradoxically yet unequivocally destroyed the planners' utopian intentions" (3). As an anthropologist, his main objective is to "provide an ethnographic description of Brasiliense society as it developed in relation to these premises" (3), and he lays the grounds for this ethnography in architecture.

Parts I and II of Holston's monograph establish "Brasília's pedigree as a modernist city" by setting out the "basic features of this city in its European and Russian context" (15). He claims that one can "easily demonstrate that the Master Plan of Brasília *derives* from CIAM [International Congress of Modern Architecture] proposals" (33), as its main functions are those of the Athens Charter: housing, work, recreation, and traffic. The anthropologist claims the Plan has a "hidden agenda," as Lúcio Costa hides that his *superquadra* housing solution derives from Le Corbusier's unit of habitation (89). Referring to the traffic solution, he notes that "the absence of the rite of passage of street corners is but one indication of a distinctive radical feature of Brasília's modernity: the absence of the streets themselves" (125). Holston's attack to the "death of the street" is a direct attack to Le Corbusier, who views the traditional street as an impediment to progress at the "Machine Age."

It is important to realize that *The Modernist City* is ultimately not about Brasília. The approach to Le Corbusier, as Holston himself puts, is "not to belittle either Costa's or Niemeyer's

³ Holston's work was further reviewed and published as book in 1989 by The University of Chicago Press, under the name *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasília*, to which some of the authors in this paper make references. I indistinctly refer to both works as *The Modernist City* since they are very close if not equal in content on their majority, but all citations and structural references come from the earlier one.

originality” (36), but to illustrate that Brasília follows CIAM rules “with great clarity” (38). Holston writes that “Brasília serves in this dissertation as a case study of the modernist city proposed in the manifestos of the CIAM” (32). His piece is an ethnographic account which can, carefully, be universalized to many other cities just as a modernist city can be universalized to anywhere. His critique is a critique of the Corbusian model of the city. As much of the research on the capital by non-historians, Holston’s argument mainly uses Brasília to exemplify the modernist principles elsewhere in the world.

James Scott, a political scientist interested in governance and resistance, also reflects upon Brasília with this intention in his work *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. Scott’s book is an ambitious worldwide collection of examples of failed state-led high-modernist endeavors. In the realm of urban planning, Scott discusses the figure of Le Corbusier and his “total city planning” (104) philosophy before introducing Brasília, “about the closest thing we have to a high-modernist city, having been built” (118). He then tries to explain why “people complain that Brasília lacks the bustle of street life, that it has none of the busy street corners and long stretches of storefront facades that animate a sidewalk for pedestrians” (125-126). His explanation relies on the urban history that the capital represents, that it “made no reference to the habits, traditions, and practices of Brazil’s past or of its great cities” (119). In terms of urban life, “Brasília was designed to eliminate the street and the square as places for public life” (120), and its planners were acting according to Corbusier’s “death of the street” principle.

Scott then brings American activist Jane Jacobs into the conversation, as an opponent to Le Corbusier. A figure of respect in Urban Studies, Jacobs organized grassroots movements in

Greenwich Village against the projects of architect Robert Moses. In her 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, she theorizes a “bottom-up” notion of urban planning. Scott analyzes Brasília’s failure using the critiques of Jacobs: the need for diversity, short blocks, aged buildings, among others. In doing so, he acknowledges that urbanity in Brazil can be explained by Jacobs’ idea of urbanity, that the death and life of Brasília is comparable to the death and life of at least a few great American cities. But, had the Village’s savior known she was going to argue for Carnaval blocks, perhaps she would have taken Moses’ side.

Similar to Scott, social scientist Lawrence Vale inserted Brasília in his book *Architecture, Power, and National Identity*. Vale writes that, different than “numerous single-city monographs on capital cities,” the quest of his work is “to explicate how the designs of particular parts of these places—the places of national government—help to clarify the structure of power in that society” (viii). His main point on Brasília revolves around the corrupted equality promised by the plan that originated the city. “Whatever the egalitarian tenets of its architects and planners, the economic and political realities of this iconically modern capital serve only to recapitulate an ancient theme: distancing the mass from the seat of courtly power” (145), he claims.

This vision resonates with Holston’s critique of Brasília’s “inversions of the Plan,” the *unexecuted* “argument that the lowest echelon employees of the government residing in Brasília ought to have the same right to the city as the highest officials” (Holston 94). Holston arraigns this justification on the modernist idea that “the creation of a new city/society entails the destruction of the older urban/social order” (95), an idea he claims is often advanced by the European modernists to justify their plans. It is imperative to consider that Holston is a bibliographical reference to many if not most authors on Brasília, including Vale himself. Scott

even writes that *The Modernist City* is an “excellent book” through which “it is possible to analyze both the logic of the plan for Brasília and the extent of its realization” (118). Thus, it is valid to trace Vale’s argument back to European modernism via *The Modernist City* as well as directly—since he mentions explicitly that “Niemeyer, like Costa, was a Brazilian disciple of Le Corbusier” (138). Similarly to how Scott incorporated the vision of Jane Jacobs, Vale incorporates Le Corbusier in the entirety of his analysis, even if indirectly. In the study of Brasília, modernity and urbanism are often concepts that refer to traditional North American, European, or even Soviet⁴ frames—but not properly Brazilian.

Many scholars of Brasília incorporate these imported concepts in their works. In her 2005 dissertation *E a história se fez cidade...: a construção histórica e historiográfica de Brasília* [And history became city...: Brasília’s historical and historiographical construction], the historian Viviane Ceballos reviews the literature on Brasília from a period that starts even before the city’s construction, with the invented mythological dream of a new capital, until roughly the 80s. Different than the critiques I address in this paper, she notices that most early works treat the construction of Brasília as a signal of prosperity for Kubitschek’s Brazil. “My intention,” she says, “is to elucidate the contradiction, the plurality out of Brasília’s image, usually seen as positive as if it were sacred” (5). Ceballos further notes, however, that there were facts appropriated by many scholars aiming at linearly explaining the history of the city, which, by itself, becomes an *a priori* conception of Brasília (6). She studies the satellite cities, and concludes that, through the view of their residents, one can better understand “the networks that built the homogeneous historiographical image” (135) of Brasília. For the later historiography,

⁴ I do not explore the influences of Soviet Urbanism on the historiography of Brasília, but a similar argument can be made. See Holston p. 40-42.

the *a priori* conception that Brasília is essentially an exemplar of the Corbusian modernist city becomes one of these networks, as it is incorporated in Holston and others.

This is the analytical perspective contemporary historians still take on Brasília, even in the scholarship produced in Brazil. Cultural historian Sainy Veloso writes about the contrast of Brasília's modernist form and homelessness on the work *Composição: Pontos Pretos sobre Fundo Verde-Amarelo* [Composition: Black Dots over Green and Yellow Background]—a modernist title within itself, that plays with the works of Mondrian, Pollock, Kandinsky. Veloso explores the relationship between Le Corbusier and Brasília, and how homeless people in the city defy the principles of the Athens Charter. She understands the Charter and its rational principles of urbanism as integral parts of Brasília's architecture (80), and writes that some problems in Brasília arise due to an excessive attachment of Lúcio Costa to the document, such as the lack of planning for population growth (83). After interviewing homeless people in Brasília, Veloso understands that they seek visibility, and use a public space which was not designed for them “to express their necessity and deprivation” (172). She claims:

Against Le Corbusier's rationalist urbanism and “death of the street” principle, they use clever procedures as an existential strategy, integrating reason and desire, knowledge and action, on their urbanistic itineraries. Spaces carefully designed in Brasília to attend the basic needs of the Athens Charter city are now crossed by the experiences of homeless people, rescuing the diversity. This allows the presence of the outsider, the chance encounter with the ignored, the exchange between the different, the recognition of the similar, the multiplicity of uses and visions. (172-173)

Although Veloso's work is outstanding and necessary to bring attention to homelessness in Brasília, she frames it as a resistance against international Modernism. “Against the modernist structures,” she says, “they [the homeless people] create inexact forms, following the flux of the dynamic matter” (205). Similar to Holston and Scott, she anchors her critique to Brasília on the death of the street, as if the perhaps unintended daily “urbanistic itinerary” of a homeless person is a pure form of Jane Jacobs’ ballet of the street. There lacks a definition of informality and informal residents of the city that is properly Brazilian, one that historians are currently looking for in the *favelas* in Rio.

Historian Ana Lúcia Gomes, on her 2007 work *Brasília: de espaço a lugar, de sertão a capital (1956-1960)* [Brasília: from space to place, from hinterland to capital], summarizes this trend in history writing as she remarks that only a few works still link the construction of Brasília to the Brazilian Modernist movement, to Oswald de Andrade’s Anthropophagy (111). Her main goal is to explore the questionable *capitalidade* [“capitality”] of Brasília; that is, the capacity it has to represent Brazil and a Brazilian union, and she eventually delves into the architectural form of the city and how scholars have treated it. “The reference to the construction of modern Brasília are,” she says, “always the principles of Le Corbusier” (112). Gomes argues that the interpretation of Brazilian Modernism as a São Paulo-centered movement, which only began to be reviewed on the 90s, influenced scholars not to associate Brasília with properly Brazilian forms (115). “Brasília is modernist on its wide avenues (...), modernist on its functional segregation (...), but equally modernist on its terraced houses inspired by colonial architecture from Minas Gerais” (160), she puts, arguing there is more to Brasília and more to Modernism than scholars usually remark.

As they write about Brasília through the static lenses of the European Modernism, historians may not understand the subtleties of Brazilianess. Written in 2005, the book *Transculturations: Cities, Spaces and Architectures in Latin America*, edited by Felipe Hernández and Mark Millington, brings a collection of essays and studies that reinterpret modernist urbanism in Latin America. Hernández writes in the introduction that, borrowing the term from Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, architecture in the region should be studied considering its *transculturation* of European art. Transculturation is a term that “redefines notions of centers and peripheries on a more democratic basis,” coined by Ortiz to “defy the assumption that cultures develop taxonomically and unidirectionally” (xi). It understands the process through which cultures interact without a hierarchical bias, as Hernández wants art historians to do in Latin America. He claims that “Latin American architectural history and theory still rely heavily on essentialist and genealogical structures that allow architects to create systems of referentiality with which to judge architectural production,” developing a univocal architectural narrative, “which has generally depended only upon the features of a few paradigmatic buildings comparable with hegemonic architectural Euro-American models” (xx). The approach to the study of Brasília, so far, has little or no transcultural element. But, in the early XXI century, transculturation has reached the scholars of Brazilian Modernism, and it can potentially be adopted as a method by historians of the capital.

An initial revolutionary interpretation of Modernism links it to the Brazilian Baroque. The Baroque achieved its full expression not in Europe but in the Latin America of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Architectural theorist Sandra Vivanco, in her essay “Trope of the Tropics,” included in *Transculturations*, proposes “the Baroque as a lens through which

we may re-examine Latin American Modernism to understand it as a symptomatic process of transculturation and hybridity” (190). She identifies the Baroque as a point of origin, an “autochthonous” art style that replaced the lacking significant pre-Columbian architecture (191). Vivanco works her argument around the writings of Lúcio Costa himself, who praised the work of Brazilian Baroque architect Aleijadinho for embodying the “Brazilian values of miscegenation and nationalism” (193). She identifies tropes in Costa’s architecture that resemble more the Brazilian Baroque than the European Modernism, arguing that the modernist architects in Brazil were more interested on legitimizing the country’s “illustrious colonial past by using nationalist arguments” (200) than to display an imported technological modernity.

Vivanco’s proposal has also been defended by other historians and architects.⁵ Oscar Niemeyer himself has said he looked for inspiration in the curves of the colonial churches in Minas Gerais to design the Pampulha Modern Ensemble. This Ensemble was developed in 1940 by Niemeyer, Cândido Portinari, and landscape architect Ricardo Burle Marx, and it includes a church, a casino (now an art museum), a ballroom and a yacht club. As other contemporary scholars, Vivanco believes that “Pampulha presented to the world in 1942-1943 the promise of a *Brazilian* architecture” (196). It is built under the modernist Corbusian style, but it does not let the Baroque aside. The church, for example, brought Portinari *azulejos* that “referenced Baroque ecclesiastical architecture” and deemed an “otherworldly scale to the back wall” (197). Corbusier himself did compliment Niemeyer for Pampulha’s project—by telling the Brazilian architect he “does the Baroque very well” (Vivanco 197).

⁵ Further on the scholarly association of Niemeyer and Costa’s work with Brazilian Baroque, see Lemos pp. 231-236 and Lara pp. 215-218. For the architects’ own saying in the question, see Niemeyer’s autobiography *The Curves of Time* and the answer of Lúcio Costa to Max Bill’s critique of the Ministry of Health and Education, *Oportunidade Perdida*, originally published in 1953. For a not particularly Baroque-centered, yet interesting challenge of the association between Le Corbusier and the Brazilian Modernism, see Comas.

Whereas Vivanco's remarks are those Ana Gomes was looking for when she explored the relationship between Brasília's terraced houses and the architecture of Minas Gerais, it would be a simplistic generalization to associate all of Niemeyer's architecture to the Baroque. There are, in Brasília, inside and outside inversions, integration of art and architecture, and a spatial hyper-awareness of theatricality—all principles that Sandra Vivanco claimed to be connecting Baroque and Modernism (195). But, if the Baroque style could be employed to explain the hyperbolic curves in Niemeyer's Metropolitan Cathedral, it might not be the best style to describe Costa's strictly geometric *superquadra* or the emptiness of the Three Powers Plaza. The Baroque is a block towards understanding that "the search for modernity in Brazil travelled inward from the beginning (...) as a rejection of imported modern models [that are] foreign and inappropriate" (Vivanco 200). This new lens, then, can be used to look for the transculturation of Brasília further within Brazilian architectural history, even back in the early colonial period.

It was Lúcio Costa himself one of the first scholars who looked for this colonial root. In his 1953 article entitled *A Arquitetura dos Jesuítas no Brasil* [Jesuit Architecture in Brazil], the architect claims that the legacy of the Jesuit priests—who have acted in Latin America between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries—to our Brazilian art is "what we have of true antiquity" and "one of the most significant contributions we might have" (128). Besides his appraisal of the Jesuit churches and of their urbanistic model of the block, it is interesting to see how the urbanist discusses the nuances of classifying Jesuit art. The altarpieces, for example, "are still not properly baroque, but are not renascentist anymore" (152). Costa argues that these pieces belong to a "transitory phase," in which the renascentist and baroque traits are juxtaposed, "a kind of no man's land" in Art History (152). Reading this article after the construction of Brasília adds a

deeper meaning to Costa's classification. In the capital, his straight line is juxtaposed to Niemeyer's sensual curves. The plan of Brasília does bring the European influence, but it also subverts it in a Brazilian way of defining modernity. Similarly, European Jesuits adapt their own post-classical style by transitioning into the Baroque and forming Brazilian antiquity.

Further studies focusing on the urban typology of the Jesuit reductions took Costa's interest as motivation to study the connections between those spaces and the greater architectural history of Brazil. Architect and urban planner Luiz Custódio, in his 2002 dissertation *A Redução de São Miguel Arcanjo: Contribuição ao Estudo da Tipologia Missioneira* [The São Miguel Reduction: A Contribution to the Study of the The Reduction Typology], brings the idea that the Jesuit reductions have been regarded as an original urban utopia of Latin America, "in what refers to their political, economic and social organization as much as its spatial design" (22). He studies the urban model developed by the Jesuits, and highlights the orthogonality of the streets forming a cross (114-115), the large and empty quadrilateral square (116), and the "unities of collective living" that the rectangular blocks represented (117). These elements are themselves present in the plan of Brasília, a relationship that Architect Rogério Entringer further explores on his 2015 work *A Cruz e a Quadra na Arquitetura dos Jesuítas no Brasil* [The Cross and the Block in Brazilian Jesuitic Architecture]. About Brasília, Entringer writes:

Brasília's plan, like the plans for the jesuit reductions, has a cross-like axis. It is centralized not by a large square culminating on the church, which symbolized the regal and ecclesiastical power dualistic relationship, but by the *Plano Piloto*, which symbolized the political power of a secular republican state. It is surrounded not by blocks made of indian dwellings, but by *superquadras* north

and south that define the familiar dwellings. However, it is also rationally organized with regard to functional segregation, with symmetry and monumentality. (23)

Considering the Jesuit reductions Brazil's architectural past, Entringer considers Brasília to be the revival and reinterpretation of this antiquity. Costa's *Plano Piloto* is no more than the cross and the block, the empty square and the orthogonal lines. Under the Jesuit analysis, the city is the revival of a Brazilian original utopia rather than the imposition of a new European one. And, however alien it may be for the Brazilian historian, interpreting the contemporary urban history of Brasília as a consequence of the XVII century Jesuit architecture and Baroque mentality has precedents in the historiography of Spanish America. Literary critic Angel Rama, in his consecrated book *The Lettered City*, traces the shaping of twentieth century Latin American cities back to the imposition of a hierarchical order by the Spanish colonizer. He claims that a "city of letters" exists since the colonial period, and a class of *letrados* has controlled urban planning with different forms of power since. Rama presents the Jesuits as the generators of this inner city because of their roles as educators. "They trained specialists in the manipulation of symbolic languages to staff colonial administrative and ecclesiastical structures in direct subordination to the metropolis. This administrative function established the norms for urban expansion and determined the material characteristics that framed community life" (17). *Letrados* originated by this urban expansion became the literary producers of the Baroque period, and "we can glimpse the conservative influence of the city of letters, relatively static in social makeup and wedded to aesthetic models that kept the *letrados* constantly harkening back to the period of their collective origin" (21). Weaving together the Baroque and the Jesuit

interpretations of modernist architecture, Rama understands the architectural forms of Latin American cities as a continuous and nonlinear canon that always memorates its own antiquity.

Brasília's *Plano Piloto* is a lettered city. It is a bureaucratic inner city, designed for and ruled by some of the most influential *letrados* in Brazil. Historians of the capital who take a perspective similar to Rama's could understand Brasília as the confluence of Brazilian urban traditions rather than the lack thereof. Although daring, it is an approach that focuses more on the power structures and social definition of a city than on the pure architectural form. In 2002, Sociologist Helena Bomeny made the claim for such an approach in her essay *Utopias de Cidade: as Capitais do Modernismo* [City Utopias: Modernism Capitals]. "It would be naive," she writes, "to suppose that the spatial configuration isolated from the political action could answer for the interactive functions that are built on daily life" (220). She criticizes Holston's critique of Brasília, as it leaves little space for intervention. Bomeny suggests that, by concentrating the contemporary critiques on the modernist project, scholars disburden the public men of their responsibility to conduct the country's social and political life (220). What she proposes is a shift on the focus of the historiography of Brasília—a shift that Gomes had already judged necessary—away from the homogeneous idea that the capital's form dictates its failure.

Alternative transcultural interpretations to modernist architecture encompass more the Brazilian processes that generated Brasília than the Corbusian centered analysis. Through the end of the twentieth century, the historiography of the capital was consolidated around the assumption that Niemeyer and Costa's work was an adaptation of the Athens Charter to the Brazilian context. More recently, historians have acknowledged this homogeneous and biased preconception, but they have not yet significantly incorporated other methods into their works.

And, even in recent works such as Veloso's *Composição*, the emphasis of the analysis remains on the resistance of the people against the form—not against the people. Studying Brasília does require attention to the form, but only because of the political and social symbols it represents. Understanding Brasília as a conturbated confluence of a Brazilian architectural past, not necessarily linear, approximates much more the form to the ideology behind it.

As more Historians choose to study Brasília, they now bear a few tools that allow for this remembrance of the past. The Baroque and the Jesuit architectural influences over Modernism are two avenues through which they can explore the interaction between the social structures of Brazil's colonial period and the twentieth century. Sandra Vivanco, defending the transcultural lens, puts that "Latin America's artistic production cannot easily ignore the trauma of slavery, missionary conversions, language erasure, dictatorship, and repression" (189). These principles are not yet fully incorporated in historiography of Brasília, but they are essential to understanding Brazilian national identity. Only through re-defining Modernism it is possible that Historians will be able to redefine Brasília's success.

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