

# BRAZILIANIZATION OR THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS



ON APRIL 21, 2010, BRASÍLIA celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. In those five decades, the city has been praised as the embodiment of hope and criticized as the materialization of despair.

Angel Rama in his classic *Ciudad Letrada* called Brasília “the most fabulous dream . . . in the new continent,” while Marshall Berman described it as “one of the most dismal cities in the world” in the preface to the second edition of *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*. In a way, Brasília embodies the typical reaction of Anglophonic scholarship toward Latin America. It is seen as either a vision of paradise or the gateway to hell. In this article I explore the maturation of Brasília vis-à-vis Brazil, playing with the fact that in English the name of the nation is spelled with a Z while the name of the capital retains the original S. In that sense, *Brazilianization* would be the nation influencing the city while *Brasílianization* refers to the city influencing the rest of the country.

To celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Brasília, the UT School of Architecture in partnership with LILAS put together a series of events in spring 2010. Three lectures and one roundtable shed light into Brasília as a complex (an often contradictory) space and how the city could be used to understand the transformations of Brazilian society. Beyond the analysis of the city in itself, I believe Brasília can be used as a representation of a new Brazil that emerged in the twenty-first century: an economic powerhouse and a strong actor on the world stage. Such an image, I might argue, was prefigured in the design and the construction of the city fifty years ago, with all its potentialities and paradoxes. Could it be possible that the city contaminated and therefore *Brasílianized* the nation?

To address that, we were fortunate enough to bring to Austin three of the most respected scholars of Brasília: James Holston (University of California, Berkeley), Frederico Holanda (Universidade de Brasília), and Ana Tostões (Politécnico de Lisboa). Professor Holston is the author of the classic anthropological analysis of Brasília *The Modernist City*, published in 1989 and still a fundamental reference on the issue.

Professor Holanda is the most revered Brazilian scholar on the topic, having published numerous books and articles about the city he moved to thirty-five years ago. His book *The Exceptional Space* was published in 2003 and is considered the most thorough response to Holston’s seminal critique. Completing the triangle, Professor Tostões is the leading Portuguese scholar of modernism and currently head of DOCOMOMO International, an institution devoted to the modern movement architectural heritage. The three scholars offered quite diverse perspectives on Brasília, and I shall use their points of view to introduce readers to the current debate on the city and what I call its *Brazilianization*.

## Holston and the Critique of Modernism

From a jet roaring above, the city of Brasília bursts into view as the striking image described in the classic 1970s literature, that of the ultimate “modernist city” analyzed by James Holston. Like an abstract painting, Brasília’s dramatic city plan unfolds boldly across the landscape, from the red soil crisscrossed by strings of asphalt over the flat *planalto*, to the orderly *superquadras* protected by the arms of the lake. While for a brief period (1956–1960) the architecture scholarship celebrated Brasília’s plan as a brilliant conceptual project, it would soon trash it as a failure of modernist central planning utopias. For those who wanted to see Brasília as a failure, Holston’s book provided the perfect foundation. The criticism was brutal and unforgiving, such that Brasília, the great modernist experiment, was proclaimed by critics to be the great modernist failure. I would, however, point out one major problem here. Holston’s book is not as much a critique of Brasília as it is a critique of the principles of CIAM (Congress Internationale d’Architecture Modern). But to what extent is Brasília a literal translation of CIAM’s Athen’s Charter of 1933? Interesting to note is that Brasília was criticized very early on by CIAM’s prominent members for not being modern enough (Liernur 1993: 108), only to be later used as a case study to discredit the very same CIAM ideas that it was said to lack. Valerie Fraser observes that in a matter of ten years (1957–1967) “Brasília came to be seen

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not as an outstanding achievement but as an outrageously ambitious project for a country like Brazil” (Fraser 2000: 255).

When revisiting the critique of the 1960s and 1970s, one needs to understand that thousands of federal employees were forced to move to the new (and yes, still quite empty) capital. Many hated it. In the beginning, they had a hard time appropriating spaces so foreign from the ones they were used to and could not wait to return to their hometowns after retiring. Moreover, the military dictatorship that took power in 1964 not only appropriated the city for its autocratic project but also persistently blocked any surviving socialist aspirations such as the original idea that apartments be allocated according to family size and not employee rankings.

## Holanda and the Defense of the Real City

People, however, do adapt to their environments, and as the city grew in the 1980s and 1990s, new migrants joined those born in Brasília to shape their built environment. They found open spaces in which to play soccer. They flocked to the main north-south axis when it was closed to traffic on Sundays, to skate, bike ride and rollerblade. The less fortunate started new peripheral cities called satellites and commuted daily to the Pilot Plan to work. And, in this car-dominated city, they even began to promote the very un-Brazilian notion of respecting pedestrians, learning to hit the brakes every time someone stepped onto the pedestrian crosswalk.

It is this city that Frederico Holanda documents as a response to Holston’s critique. Trained in the Space Syntax tradition at UCL (University College London), Holanda looks at the morphology of the 2-million-people metropolis (of which the Pilot Plan represents about 25 percent, or 500,000 people) in search of a more real Brasília. Positioning his analysis in opposition to Holston’s, Holanda defends Brasília by showing that it is much more than a modernist city. In a way, the disagreeing scholars are aiming at different things: Holston uses Brasília to criticize modern urbanism at large; Holanda argues that Brasília is a success

because it is beyond modernism. His analysis of the monumental scale shows that Costa’s plan is more complex than CIAM’s separation of functions. Moreover, Holanda demonstrates that Brasília’s urban plan is very much rooted in tradition, adding a dimension that was not present at all in Corbusier’s *ville radieuse*, for instance.

But what has happened to Brasília in the intervening decades? Is it still the monumental but uninhabitable city described by its critics in the 1970s or has it grown into something else? With distance and time we can revisit some of the arguments of these critics. Hundreds of thousands of people have migrated to the booming new capital looking for jobs that were not available in their hometowns. What city did they find and what city has it become? Frederico Holanda is again the one who better answers those questions. His analysis of metropolitan Brasília shows how it has become the most segregated city in the country. The spatial inequality that is characteristic of Brazilian cities is exacerbated in Brasília due to more (not less) governmental control of land use. The city can be said to have been inevitably contaminated by the rest of the nation, that is, *Brazilianized*. Or worse, while in other Brazilian cities the working poor have tackled housing problems (literally) with their own hands, the protected nature of the Pilot Plan has been consistently enforced to eradicate any informal settlement.

## The Challenge of Preserving the Modern

Here I find a point of agreement among all scholars. The preservation layer is extremely problematic in Brasília. In a special anniversary article for *Veja*, a Brazilian magazine with wide circulation among the middle class, Holston calls for the end of the preservation laws to “free the spirit of Brasília.” Protected by national conservation laws since the late 1960s and UNESCO World Heritage guidelines since 1987, Brasília’s plan is fiercely defended by a group of architects and planners reminiscent of Niemeyer’s tenure as “architect-in-chief.”

As noted by Hugo Segawa, conservation and preservation were not key words in the Modern Movement repertoire. In Brazil “the

intelligentsia that introduced modern art, architecture and literature ... was responsible also for matters of preservation,” something that was praised before but is now considered quite controversial (Segawa 1998: 43). During his visit to Austin last March, Gilberto Gil, Brazilian Minister of Culture from 2003–2008, referred to IPHAN (the national office of conservation that belongs to his ministry) as the most ossified and reactionary of all institutions. Radical preservation (or hysterical preservation, as I call it) inevitably means the preservation of old privileges and old inequalities, and that is certainly the case in Brasília.

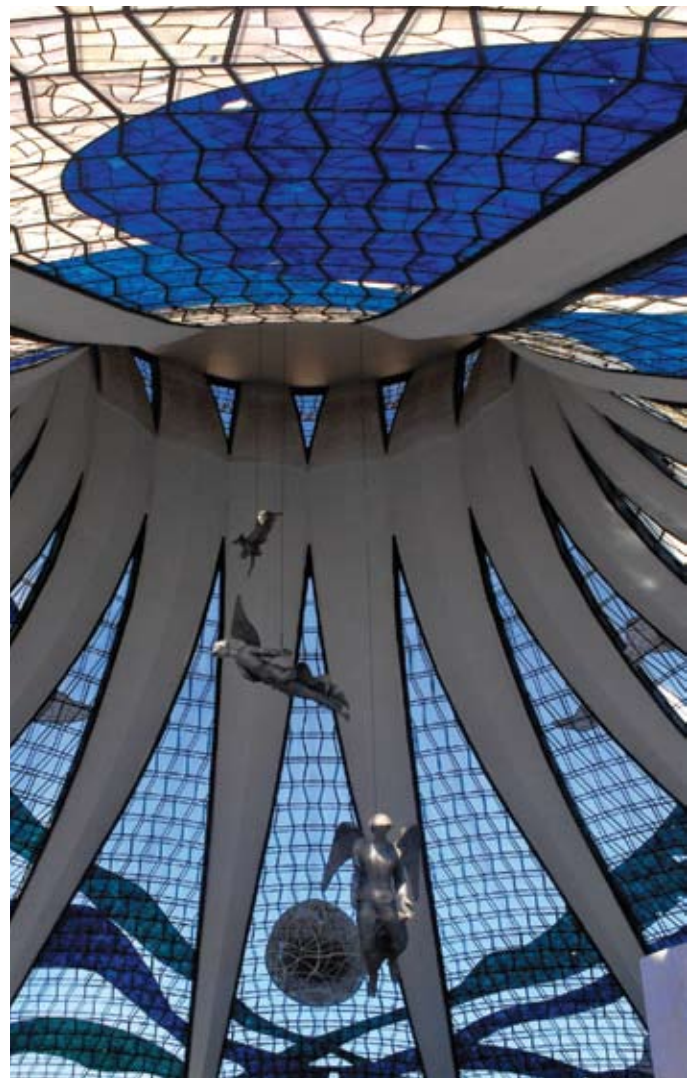
Nevertheless, the city has changed despite every effort to the contrary. One of the major criticisms of the young city was the antiseptic quality of the super blocks, the neighborhoods for private life. Today, the *superquadras* are thriving with busy restaurants and bars every few blocks and noisy with children playing on the interstitial green spaces. What caused the change? The main factor is time. The small young trees planted at the city’s inception have grown into large shady canopies. Stores that address the specific needs of the local inhabitants have thrived and multiplied. These changes highlight the fact that no city can be judged at its beginning. Instead, Brasília, like all cities, needed time to develop and evolve.

Unfortunately, as the city was evolving and maturing, European and North American scholarship was not paying attention. Richard Williams explains that early European critics analyzed Brasília as “an object in which they had much invested. They owned it, in effect, as an experiment ... That sense of ownership is absent from more recent writing ... Brasília no longer has any purchase on the critical imagination as a model, but it can be appreciated as an aesthetic object ... In this scenario, the city’s negative character is frequently exaggerated for literary effect” (Williams 2007: 320–321).

Another frequent criticism of Brasília regards its reliance on highways. Indeed, one must use a car, bus, or taxi to get anywhere in the city. For those who dislike automobiles, Brasília will never be admired. However, its system of roads is efficient and rarely congested. In fact, it is a shining success when compared to many other highway-driven cities, such as Los Angeles. Interesting to note is that while Rayner Banham was praising LA for its automobile “ecology” in 1971, the international intelligentsia was criticizing Brasília for exactly the same reason. In terms of automobile dependency, there are very few cities that could cast the first stone today, and none that could have done it in the 1960s.

Brasília’s success in this regard reveals a troubling assumption made by its critics, one that goes to the heart of the expectations of a Latin American city. For planners in the United States and Northern Europe, Latin American cities are understood as gridded cities, with a central plaza and streets filled with people selling their wares or enjoying outdoor cafes. Many of these images are based on the evolution of urban planning in Spanish-speaking cities in Latin America. Portugal and its colonial settlements in Brazil never followed this type of urban development. Portuguese and Brazilian cities rarely had central plazas or gridded streets. Instead, planning tended to be organic, following access to ports, with the population centers hugging the coasts. Hence, to criticize Brasília for not having central plazas filled with local inhabitants and streets filled with more pedestrians than cars is to be blind to Brazilian urban planning history and to foster unfair expectations.

Our third guest speaker, Ana Tostões, spoke in detail of Brasília’s



Brasília Cathedral, designed by Oscar Niemeyer, stained glass by Marianne Peretti.

ancient roots, all the way back to colonial times. She reminded us that the Portuguese moved their entire court to Rio de Janeiro in 1808, inverting the colonial rule, and that the idea of moving the capital farther inland was written into the Brazilian constitution as early as 1823, only one year after the heir to the Portuguese crown declared the Brazilian independence. The idea of Brasília has clear Portuguese roots, something that only recently has been explored (El Dahdah 2010). In the opposite direction, Lucio Costa would turn out to be very influential in Portugal from the 1940s, serving as inspiration for the “necessary documentation” of Portuguese traditions while Brazilian modernism of the 1950s was becoming the ideal, the ultimate aspiration. Universality was surely a major ingredient of the Modern Movement, but the tropics, in the words of Tostões, turned Le Corbusier sideways. At the MES building (1936–1943) the horizontal sketch of the French-Swiss master was turned vertical to fit better into Rio’s downtown. Two decades later, Costa limited to six stories the height of the blocks at Brasília’s *superquadras*, fine-tuning Corbusier’s housing proposals to the human scale. As Jane Jacobs was already thinking at that time (but would not publish until



five years later), the six-story buildings have a direct relationship with the ground that is lost on higher structures. The American experience had always been about experimentation, and Brasília was no exception.

Yes, Brasília is not a perfect city, and like all cities it has aspects that don't work and that deserve to be criticized. As everywhere in Brazil, the inequalities are there, the spatial exclusions are there, and so is the frustration with the slow pace of necessary transformation. But what is most interesting is how Brazilians have adapted to these challenges, how they have brought Brazilian traditions with them while developing new urban practices. And, as in Rio and São Paulo, the richness of daily life in Brasília's *superquadras* and satellite cities is bruised but not obliterated by the brutality of income inequality and spatial exclusion.

To conclude, I will borrow the words of a fourth scholar who touched on Brasília while visiting UT last year. Mauricio Tenorio Trillo, political scientist at the University of Chicago, commented that Brasília should not be seen as a plan to be perfectly implemented, as if we could expect a new society to emerge from a new set of buildings. Instead, Brasília serves as an aspiration, an ambition, a guiding light pointing the direction. In that sense, the ambitions of Kubitscheck and Costa in 1956 have indeed survived those five decades quite well. The Brazil of 2010 is closer than ever to the larger-than-life ideals of Brasília. Besides, it is impossible to imagine the country without the powerful symbolism of its modern lines.

The city *Brasílianized* the nation as much as the nation *Brazilianized* the city.

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Brasília Cathedral, designed by Oscar Niemeyer.



Brazilian National Congress, designed by Oscar Niemeyer.