

Seeing Like a State

*How Certain Schemes to
Improve the Human
Condition Have Failed*

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called the "total efficiency and total rationalization" of a new machine-age civilization was uncompromising.⁴⁹ Although he was obliged to deal with nation-states, his vision was universal. As he put it, "city planning everywhere, universal city planning, total city planning."⁵⁰ His actual plans for Algiers, Paris, and Rio were, as we have seen, on a scale that was virtually without precedent. Le Corbusier was influenced, as were others of his generation, by the spectacle of total military mobilization in World War I. "Let's make our plans," he urged, "plans on a scale with twentieth century events, plans equally as big as Satan's [war]. . . . Big! Big!"⁵¹

The visual, aesthetic component of his bold plans was central. Clean, smooth lines were something he associated with the "all-business" leanness of the machine. He was positively lyrical about the beauty of the machine and its products. And houses, cities, and agrovilles could also "emerge properly equipped, glitteringly new, from the factory, from the workshop, faultless products of smoothly humming machines."⁵²

Integral, finally, to Le Corbusier's ultramodernism was his repudiation of tradition, history, and received taste. After explaining the origin of the traffic congestion in contemporary Paris, he warned against temptations to reform. "We must refuse even the slightest consideration to *what is*: to the mess we are in now." He emphasized, "There is no solution to be found here."⁵³ Instead, he insisted, we must take a "blank piece of paper," a "clean tablecloth," and start new calculations from zero. It was in this context that he was drawn to the USSR and to the ambitious rulers of developing countries. There, he hoped, he would not be cramped by the "grotesquely inadequate sites" available in the West, where it was possible to practice only what he called an "*orthopedic architecture*."⁵⁴ The long-established cities of the West, their traditions, their interest groups, their slow-moving institutions, and their complex legal and regulatory structures could only shackle the dreams of a high-modernist Gulliver.

Brasília: The High-Modernist City Built—Almost

Cities also believe they are the work of the mind or of chance, but neither the one nor the other suffices to hold up their walls.

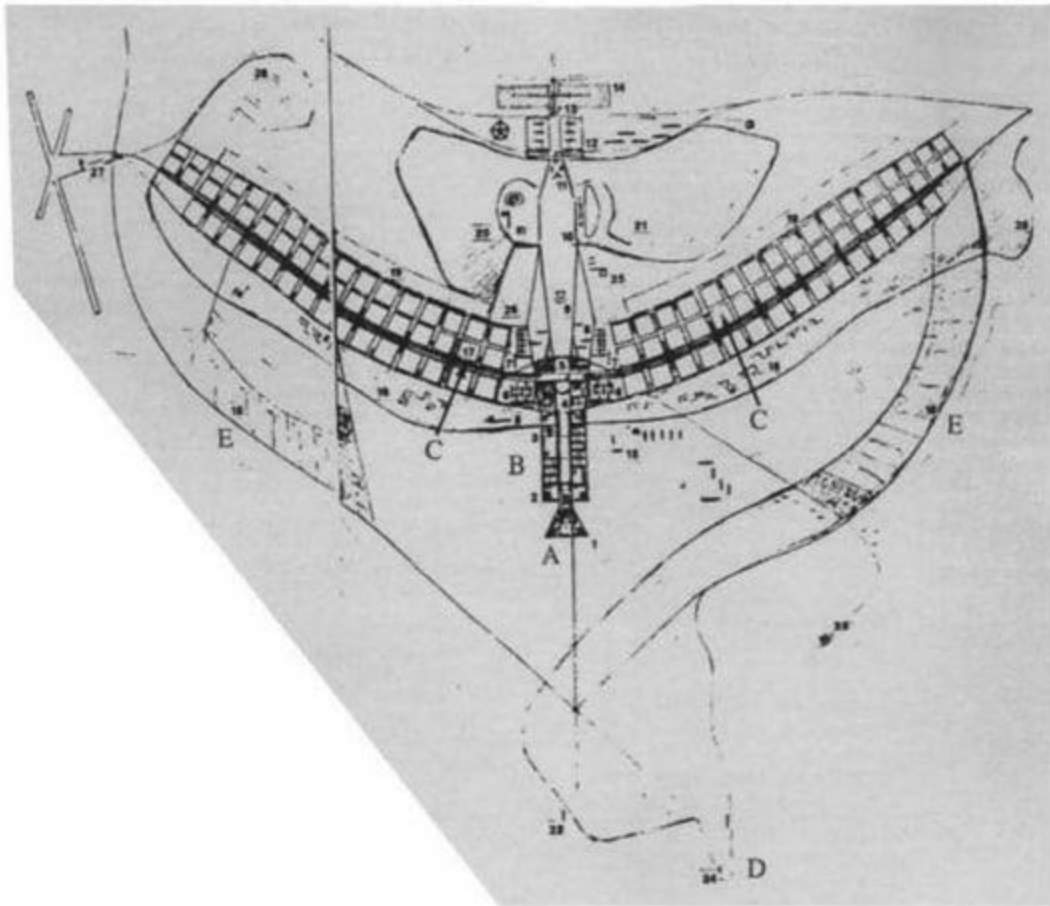
—Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

No utopian city gets built precisely as designed by its prophet-architect. Just as the scientific forester is foiled by the vagaries of unpredictable nature and by the divergent purposes of both his employers and those who have access to the forest, so the urban planner must contend with

the tastes and financial means of his patrons as well as the resistance of builders, workers, and residents. Even so, Brasília is about the closest thing we have to a high-modernist city, having been built more or less along the lines set out by Le Corbusier and CIAM. Thanks to an excellent book by James Holston, *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasília*,⁵⁵ it is possible to analyze both the logic of the plan for Brasília and the extent of its realization. An appreciation of the slippage between what Brasília meant for its originators on one hand and for its residents on the other will in turn pave the way (no pun intended) for Jane Jacob's thoroughgoing critique of modern urban planning.

The idea of a new capital in the interior predates even the independence of Brazil.⁵⁶ Its realization, however, was the pet project of Juscelino Kubitschek, the populist president from 1956 to 1961, who promised Brazilians "fifty years of progress in five" and a future of self-sustaining economic growth. In 1957 Oscar Niemeyer, who had already been named the chief architect for public buildings and housing prototypes, organized a design competition that was won, on the basis of very rough sketches, by Lucio Costa. Costa's idea—for it was no more than that—was of a "monumental axis" to define the center of the city, which consisted of terraced embankments describing an arc intersected in its center by a straight avenue, and of a triangle to define the city's limits (figure 18).

Both architects were working within the doctrines of CIAM and Le Corbusier. Niemeyer, a longtime member of the Brazilian Communist Party, was also influenced by the Soviet version of architectural modernism. After the design competition, construction began almost immediately on an empty site on the Central Plateau in the state of Goiás, nearly 1000 kilometers from Rio de Janeiro and the coast and 1620 kilometers from the Pacific Ocean in the northeast. It was indeed a new city in the wilderness. No "orthopedic" compromises were necessary now that the planners had, thanks to Kubitschek, who made Brasília his top priority, a "clean tablecloth." The state planning agency controlled all the land at the site, so there were no private-property owners with whom to negotiate. The city was then designed from the ground up, according to an elaborate and unified plan. Housing, work, recreation, traffic, and public administration were each spatially segregated as Le Corbusier would have insisted. Inasmuch as Brasília was itself a single-function, strictly administrative capital, the planning itself was greatly simplified.



18. The Costa plan of 1957, showing A, the Plaza of the Three Powers; B, the ministries; C, superquadra residential zones; D, the president's residence; and E, single-family housing

Brasília as the Negation (or Transcendence) of Brazil

Brasília was conceived of by Kubitschek and by Costa and Niemeyer as a city of the future, a city of development, a realizable utopia. It made no reference to the habits, traditions, and practices of Brazil's past or of its great cities, São Paulo, Salvador, and Rio de Janeiro. As if to emphasize the point, Kubitschek called his own residence in Brasília the Dawn Palace. "What else will Brasília be," he asked, "if not the dawn of a new day for Brazil?"⁵⁷ Like the Saint Petersburg of Peter the Great, Brasília was to be an exemplary city, a center that would transform the lives of the Brazilians who lived there—from their personal habits and household organization to their social lives, leisure, and work. The goal of making over Brazil and Brazilians necessarily implied a disdain for what Brazil had been. In this sense, the whole point of the new capital was to be a manifest contrast to the corruption, backwardness, and ignorance of the old Brazil.

The great crossroads that was the plan's point of departure has been variously interpreted as a symbol of Christ's cross or an Amazonian bow. Costa, however, referred to it as a "monumental axis," the same term that Le Corbusier used to describe the center of many of his urban plans. Even if the axis represented a small attempt to assimilate Brasília in some way to its national tradition, it remained a city that could have been anywhere, that provided no clue to its own history, unless that history was the modernist doctrine of CIAM. It was a state-imposed city invented to project a new Brazil to Brazilians and to the world at large. And it was a state-imposed city in at least one other sense: inasmuch as it was created to be a city for civil servants, many aspects of life that might otherwise have been left to the private sphere were minutely organized, from domestic and residential matters to health services, education, child care, recreation, commercial outlets, and so forth.

If Brasília was to be Brazil's urban future, what was Brazil's urban past and present? What, precisely, was the new capital intended to negate? A large part of the answer can be inferred from Le Corbusier's second principle of the new urbanism: "the death of the street." Brasília was designed to eliminate the street and the square as places for public life. Although the elimination of local *bairro* loyalties and rivalries may not have been planned, they were also a casualty of the new city.

The public square and the crowded "corridor" street had been venues of civic life in urban Brazil since colonial days. As Holston explains, this civic life took two forms. In the first, which had been sponsored by the church or state, ceremonial or patriotic processions and rituals were typically held in the principal square of the town.⁵⁸ The second form encompassed a nearly inexhaustible range of popular uses of all the town squares. Children might play there; adults might simply shop, stroll and run into acquaintances, meet friends for a meal or coffee, play cards or chess, enjoy the social diversions of seeing and being seen. The point is that the square, as a confluence of streets and a sharply enclosed, framed space, become what Holston aptly calls a "public visiting room."⁵⁹ As a public room, the square is distinguished by its accessibility to all social classes and the great variety of activities it accommodates. Barring state proscriptions, it is a flexible space that enables those who use it to use it for *their* mutual purposes. The square or the busy street attracts a crowd precisely because it provides an animated scene—a scene in which thousands of unplanned, informal, improvised encounters can take place simultaneously. The street was the spatial focus for public life outside the usually cramped family dwelling.⁶⁰ The colloquialism for "I'm going downtown" was "I'm going

to the street." As the focus for sociability, these spaces were also crucial sites for the development of public opinion as well as for "bairro nationalism," which could take institutional form in sports teams, bands, patron-saint celebrations, festival groups, and so on. It goes without saying that the street or the public square, under the right circumstances, could also become the site of public demonstrations and riots directed against the state.

A mere glance at the scenes of Brasília, juxtaposed to the urban Brazil that we have been describing, shows at once how radical is the transformation. There are no streets in the sense of public gathering places; there are only roads and highways to be used exclusively by motorized traffic (compare figures 19 and 20).

There *is* a square. But what a square! The vast, monumental Plaza of the Three Powers, flanked by the Esplanade of the Ministries, is of such a scale as to dwarf even a military parade (compare figures 21 and 22, and figures 23 and 24). In comparison, Tiananmen Square and the Red Square are positively cozy and intimate. The plaza is best seen, as are many of Le Corbusier's plans, from the air (as in figure 24). If one were to arrange to meet a friend there, it would be rather like trying to meet someone in the middle of the Gobi desert. And if one did meet up with one's friend, there would be nothing to do. Functional simplification demands that the rationale for the square as a public visiting room be designed out of Brasília. This plaza is a symbolic center for the state; the only activity that goes on around it is the work of the ministries. Whereas the vitality of the older square depended on the mix of residence, commerce, and administration in its catchment area, those who work in the ministries must drive to their residences and then again to the separate commercial centers of each residential area.

One striking result of Brasília's cityscape is that virtually all the public spaces in the city are officially designated public spaces: the stadium, the theater, the concert hall, the planned restaurants. The smaller, unstructured, informal public spaces—sidewalk cafés, street corners, small parks, neighborhood squares—do not exist. Paradoxically, a great deal of nominally open space characterizes this city, as it does Le Corbusier's city plans. But that space tends to be "dead" space, as in the Plaza of the Three Powers. Holston explains this by showing how CIAM doctrines create sculptural masses widely separated by large voids, an inversion of the "figure-ground" relations in older cities. Given our perceptual habits, these voids in the modernist city seem to be not inviting public spaces but boundless, empty spaces that are avoided.⁶¹ One could fairly say that the effect of the plan was to design out all those unauthorized locations where casual encounters could



19. Residential street in the neighborhood Barra Funda, São Paulo, 1988



20. Residential access way L1 in Brasília, 1980



21. Largo do Pelourinho, with the museum of the city and the former slave market, São Salvador, 1980



23. The Praça de Sé, São Paulo, 1984



22. The Plaza of the Three Powers, with the museum of the city and Planalto Palace, Brasília, 1980



24. The Plaza of the Three Powers and the Esplanade of the Ministries, Brasília, 1981

occur and crowds could gather spontaneously. The dispersal and functional segregation meant that meeting someone virtually required a plan.

Costa and Niemeyer were not only banishing the street and the square from their utopian city. They believed that they were also banishing crowded slums, with their darkness, disease, crime, pollution, traffic jams and noise, and lack of public services. There were definite advantages to beginning with an empty, bulldozed site belonging to the state. At least the problems of land speculation, rent gouging, and property-based inequalities that beset most planners could be circumvented. As with Le Corbusier and Haussmann, there was an emancipating vision here. The best and most current architectural knowledge about sanitation, education, health, and recreation could be made part of the design. Twenty-five square meters of green space per resident reached the UNESCO-designed ideal. And as with any utopian plan, the design of Brasília reflected the social and political commitments of the builders and their patron, Kubitschek. All residents would have similar housing; the sole difference would be the number of units they were allotted. Following the plans of progressive European and Soviet architects, the planners of Brasília grouped the apartment buildings into what were called *superquadra* in order to facilitate the development of a collective life. Each *superquadra* (roughly 360 apartments housing 1,500–2,500 residents) had its own nursery and elementary school; each grouping of four *superquadra* had a secondary school, a cinema, a social club, sports facilities, and a retail sector.

Virtually all the needs of Brasília's future residents were reflected in the plan. It is just that these needs were the same abstract, schematic needs that produced the formulas for Le Corbusier's plans. Although it was surely a rational, healthy, rather egalitarian, state-created city, its plans made not the slightest concession to the desires, history, and practices of its residents. In some important respects, Brasília is to São Paulo or Rio as scientific forestry is to the unplanned forest. Both plans are highly legible, planned simplifications devised to create an efficient order that can be monitored and directed from above. Both plans, as we shall see, miscarry in comparable respects. Finally, both plans change the city and the woods to conform to the simple grid of the planner.

Living in Brasília

Most of those who have moved to Brasília from other cities are amazed to discover "that it is a city without crowds." 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. For them, it is almost as if the founders of Brasília, rather than having planned a city, have actually planned to prevent a city. The most common way they put it is to say that Brasília "lacks street corners," by which they mean that it lacks the complex intersections of dense neighborhoods comprising residences and public cafés and restaurants with places for leisure, work, and shopping. While Brasília provides well for some human needs, the functional separation of work from residence and of both from commerce and entertainment, the great voids between *superquadra*, and a road system devoted exclusively to motorized traffic make the disappearance of the street corner a foregone conclusion. The plan did eliminate traffic jams; it also eliminated the welcome and familiar pedestrian jams that one of Holston's informants called "the point of social conviviality."⁶²

The term *brasilite*, meaning roughly Brasil(ia)-itis, which was coined by the first-generation residents, nicely captures the trauma they experienced.⁶³ As a mock clinical condition, it connotes a rejection of the standardization and anonymity of life in Brasília. "They use the term *brasilite* to refer to their feelings about a daily life without the pleasures—the distractions, conversations, flirtations, and little rituals—of outdoor life in other Brazilian cities."⁶⁴ Meeting someone normally requires seeing them either at their apartment or at work. Even if we allow for the initial simplifying premise of Brasília's being an administrative city, there is nonetheless a bland anonymity built into the very structure of the capital. The population simply lacks the small accessible spaces that they could colonize and stamp with the character of their activity, as they have done historically in Rio and São Paulo. To be sure, the inhabitants of Brasília haven't had much time to modify the city through their practices, but the city is designed to be fairly recalcitrant to their efforts.⁶⁵

"*Brasilite*," as a term, also underscores how the built environment affects those who dwell in it. Compared to life in Rio and São Paulo, with their color and variety, the daily round in bland, repetitive, austere Brasília must have resembled life in a sensory deprivation tank. The recipe for high-modernist urban planning, while it may have created formal order and functional segregation, did so at the cost of a sensorily impoverished and monotonous environment—an environment that inevitably took its toll on the spirits of its residents.

The anonymity induced by Brasília is evident from the scale and exterior of the apartments that typically make up each residential *superquadra* (compare figures 25 and 26). For *superquadra* residents,