

# BRASILIA: BETWEEN UTOPIAN MODERN- ISM AND SPIRITUAL QUEST

THE BRAZILIAN  
CAPITAL AT THE EVE  
OF ITS 50TH  
ANNIVERSARY

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A famous and controversial prophecy attributed to André Malraux states that the “21st century will be religious or will not be at all”. Today’s Brasília, with all its contrasts between rationalist modernism and eclectic mysticism, apparently fits into that prediction. In spite of the controversy that has always centered on the dream-project of Brazilian President Juscelino Kubitschek, it is hard to think of another artistic achievement of the 20th century that captures Modernism’s essence better than the new Brazilian capital, which is, at the same time, a gigantic work of art. Modernism’s main characteristics – rationalism and the search for functionalism – would find its ideal land of opportunity for practical experimentation not so much in countries of more consolidated and consequently more resistant traditions but rather in fast-growing Brazil of the latter half of the nineteen fifties. In those days of optimism and confidence in building a brighter future, several decisive factors – fast economic growth, rapid industrialization, accelerated urbanization – all came together to create a propitious climate for the construction of the new Brazilian capital.

Brasília’s representativeness as the utmost expression of Modernism in architecture and urbanism derives not only from the rationality, functionalism and social utopian aspect of such project but above everything else from its sheer scale and grandiose dimensions. Many, if not most of Le Corbusier’s projects never went beyond the stage of the artist’s drawing desk. In that light, it was by an extraordinary piece of good luck that Brazilian architects and urban planners, inspired by him, were offered the rare chance of giving reality to one of the most ambitious designs of the Swiss architect: to build a completely new capital in the middle of a void territory, without any major financial constraint or aesthetic limitations. The key factor that made that dream possible was a visionary kind of politician who had just won the disputed Brazilian presidential elections of 1955. A sort of magic moment made of Brazil the meeting point at that stage in history of two kinds of dreamers: the urban-planner-*cum*-architect, mainly the urban-planner Lúcio Costa and the architect Oscar Niemeyer, and the politician-*cum*-public administrator, the democratically-elected

President Juscelino Kubitschek de Oliveira, who ruled the country from 1956 to 1961.

There were, of course, other ‘artificial’ capitals in new countries, some of which have never actually caught up as real functioning capitals. Brasília however is unique in the sense that it has become clearly associated with creative personalities in such an intimate degree that it can be compared to a collective work of art. Possibly, such exceptional accomplishment could only be achieved in the context of the optimistic dynamism of the immediate post-World War II aftermath, of the ‘baby boom’ and accelerated economic expansion period, when people still believed in a full-employment economy and many utopias appeared within reach. Brasília is the mature outcome of the combination of different tendencies that bloomed in the *bossa nova* musical movement, the literary works by João Guimarães Rosa, Clarice Lispector, Carlos Drummond de Andrade and others, and in the conquest of the Brazilian national team of its first World Football Cup in 1958. It was also the decade in which the São Paulo Biennial made its debut and Brazilian art took a determined turn toward experimentalism through plastic Constructivism, Concretist Poetry and the experimental works by Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark.

Started at the highest point of this fundamentally positive moment, the construction effort of Brasília came to an end when an opposing tendency gathered strength in a direction that challenged and negated the principles and beliefs of the previous phase. It is paradoxical and even ironic that one of the principal creations of Modernism would be concluded when that cultural movement had become increasingly contested everywhere in the world. The change in cultural hegemony worldwide took place more and less at the same moment when a repressive and reactionary military movement was staging a coup to usurp political power in Brazil. That fateful coincidence in time should have naturally threatened and compromised the consolidation of the new capital. It was barely through a sort of quasi-miracle that the essentials of the original project would survive. The explanation for this

unexpected outcome is to be found in the single ground where the military could identify themselves with at least one particular aspect of the new capital project. Indeed, beyond its artistic inspiration, Brasília was equally the symbol of a political project that should transform Brazil into a rich and developed country, the basis for a future 'great power' – a dream shared by both the military and President Kubitschek.

Inseparable from the Brasília dream was the purpose of turning the country's back to Rio de Janeiro, the old, charmingly beautiful but socially troubled capital, in order to build a new eugenic, white, unpolluted, functional capital, immune to the accumulated vices of four hundred years of slavery and injustice. Reality decisively defeated that presumption both in social and aesthetic terms, even though fifty years after the new capital's inauguration, Kubitschek's grand design has in part come true as Brasília would set off the rush toward Brazil's last agricultural frontier: the *cerrado* or savanna around the new capital, one of the main causes of the recently-achieved economic prosperity of the country. In Brasília itself, however, a sort of spontaneous rebellion against the functional rationalism of Modernism began to gain strength since almost the very first days. That reaction often exploded in hybrid combinations of eclecticism, popular kitsch and extreme fantasy expressed in the architectonic styles of churches of all sects and denominations, private residences and commercial buildings. Outside the core planned area of the so-called *Plano Piloto* (Pilot Plan), the most absolute anarchy and indiscipline of urban patterns and construction styles has long been the rule in the satellite-cities spawning around Brasília – just as in the peripheries of every Brazilian city.

As a matter of fact, since the first discussions of the project of moving the capital to the interior, there was a strong element of irrationality and even mysticism, with no connection or affinity whatsoever with urban planning rationality. A well-known expression of that semi-religious element is the recurrent reference to a famous prophecy of Saint John Bosco, a 19th century Italian saint who had a dream in which he saw a new bright civilization emerging in the middle

of South America. From the start, Brasília would give birth to an enormous variety of esoteric and syncretistic sects in surrounding areas baptized with evocative names such as Vale do Amanhecer (the Valley of Dawn) or Cidade Eclética (Eclectic City). People with stories to tell about encounters with flying saucers and extraterrestrial beings in the 'strange distances' of the Central Plateau of Brasília never ceased to flock to the new capital. Those contrasts and contradictions, ironies and paradoxes have given shape to the process of transforming Brasília from a rationalistic aesthetic-social project into a living organism, receiving a permanent infusion of life from its more than two million inhabitants, four times above the desired limit in the original plan.

One of the unexpected outcomes of the project has been the unintended development that took place in architecture, the art *par excellence* that lies at the very heart of the new capital's success and consolidation. To a great extent, the recognition and acclaim that greeted Oscar Niemeyer's work had the effect of making official Brazilian architecture a reflection, to this day, of the same modality of architectonic style that shaped Brasília in the nineteen fifties. Originally conceived as an invitation to innovation and avant-garde, the city turned out into a major contributing factor to a sort of 'freezing' in time of official architecture. A perceptible gap developed and widened between that kind of architecture and other manifestations of Brazilian visual arts, much more receptive to the influence or inspiration of other contemporary international currents.

All those conflicting elements have converged to maintain around the experience of Brasília a permanent movement of interest and critical analysis. As a case the city has been of great interest to architects, but also to contemporary artists such as Dominique González-Foerster, Pierre Huyghe, Sean Snyder and many others, who have analyzed various aspects of this architectonic, urbanistic and political project suggesting different perspectives of approach and interpretation of the city. Even though not so young any longer, Brasília continues to be the source of great fascination for many artists, inspiring complex and intriguing im-

ages of its own identity as an important symbol of Modernism.

In a parallel way, other artists have been more attracted to themes linked to the resurgence in modern societies of new varieties of mysticism, esoteric knowledge, the exploration of the supernatural, and secret societies. Despite a superficial similarity, the flourishing of these trends in Brasília preceded in time their appearance in other countries and corresponded to a completely different, even opposing, spirit. In Europe and North America, much of the tendency (not all; *new wave* is closer to the Brasília reality) acquired force under the influence of terrorism, the 9/11 impact, the approaching ecological disaster of global warming, the financial crisis, and often conveys a global sense of historical tragedy. In contrast, the Brazilian varieties of occultism are not somber in nature; they relate more to Spiritualism, at times mixed with Afro-Brazilian religious influence of *Candomblé* (Yoruba religion from Benin and Nigeria) and *Umbanda* (a syncretic cult with a strong African component), and they are basically confident in the evolution and the improvement of human beings.

A thoughtful and balanced reflection about the Brazilian capital at the eve of reaching its first half-century of existence – Brasília was inaugurated on April the 21st, 1960 – has to start from this constantly evolving and changing reality. Rather than staying by the superficial aspects of a picturesque or anecdotic character, it should dig in search of the cultural and social forces that are hidden behind the original plan's changes and distortions. Perhaps, it would be too much to ask from our contemporary perspectives to refrain from judging Brasília in the light of our own values of systematic doubt and skepticism – nevertheless, an attempt at fully understanding what such an optimistic project represented for their creators and contemporaries has to confront the achievements side by side with the shortcomings; the improvements in people's lives together with the persistence of exclusion and marginalization; the fact that Brasília is, at the same time, the symbol of political corruption and the vital scene of the struggle for perfecting democracy in Brazil.

In conclusion, the best way of celebrating the first fifty years of Brasília's existence is to integrate these different points of view, from the inside and the outside, in order to build a vast and dynamic panorama of one of the most audacious cultural adventures of the twentieth century.

This essay is published in the context of the exhibition *We Were Exuberant and Still Had Hope: Ettore Sottsass, works from Stockholm, 1969*