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The Spirit of Brasília Modernity as Experiment and Risk

James Holston

Travelers usually experience Brasília as a city removed from the rest of Brazil. This sense of separation derives in part from Brasília's great distance from the Atlantic coast, to which Brazilians have for centuries "clung like crabs," as Frei Vicente do Salvador put it.[1] By road or by air, travelers must cross this distance to reach the city. They traverse a limbo not of jungle, as outsiders sometimes imagine, but of two million square kilometers of highland *cerrado*, dry and stunted, that is the desolate Central Plateau of Brazil. At the approximate center of this flatland, Brasília comes into view as an exclamation mark on the horizon, like an idea, heroic and romantic, the acropolis of an enormous empty expanse. Once swept inside the city on its superspeedways, travelers confront a more complex separation, that of Modernist Brasília from the familiar Brazil: they encounter an entire city of detached rectangular boxes, the transparencies of a world of glass facades, automobile traffic flowing uninhibited in all directions, vast spaces seemingly empty without the social life of streets and squares, and serial order, clean, quiet, and efficient. In short, they find modernity, regulation, and progress on display.

Yet if this urbanism appears incongruously Brazilian, for those who know Brazil, Brasília's history expresses at the same time a remarkably Brazilian way of doing things. By history, I refer to the processes of building the city and structuring its society. Although their result may appear the opposite today, these processes also exemplify that knack for improvisation for which Brazil is famous. I mean that sense of invention found in so many facets of Brazilian life, from soccer and samba to *telenovelas*, from theories of modernity (such as *Antropofagia*) to everyday race mixing, from "autoconstructed" (self-built) housing in the urban peripheries to federal initiatives in the treatment of AIDS. It is improvisation by design, a

desire to overcome by leaping, an instinct for the advantages of play. It is the need to be modern that views a lack of resources as an opportunity for innovation. After all, Brazilians built Brasília in just three and a half years. They turned a spot in the middle of nowhere, marked by an "x" on the ground, not only into an inhabitable city in record time but also into one that presented to the whole world of 1960 the most modern form of urbanism. To do so, they employed the tactics of bricolage, and they experimented in all fields. Thus, they reproduced in pioneering Brasília Brazil's distinctive style of inventing its own modernity.

In specific ways, therefore, Brasília is both radically separate from and part of the "rest of Brazil." Examples of this contradiction abound. For example, Brasília's Master Plan prohibited the development of an urban periphery for the city's poor, typical of other Brazilian cities. As the national capital, Brasília had to be different, and its planners aimed to preclude unwanted characteristics of the rest of Brazil. Yet, as I explain later, government policy created an impoverished periphery of Satellite Cities even before the capital's inauguration in 1960, "Brazilianizing" its foundations. Therefore both the Plano Piloto (as the privileged Modernist city is called) and the Satellite Cities constitute Brasília, which must be understood as a regional city from the beginning. The city that resulted, however, does not simply reproduce the rest of Brazil around it that planners wanted to deny. In its combination of the radically new and the familiar, Brasília remains distinct in the constellation of Brazilian cities.

This special quality derives not so much from the city's identity as a capital of capitals, but from Brasília's founding conception as an experiment in urbanism to risk something new. It is precisely this daring to embrace the modern as a field for experiment and risk that the city's pioneers called the "spirit of Brasília." This spirit of innovation structured Brasília at many levels. It motivated planners to make Brasília different, not for the sake of exoticism but to establish an arena of experimentation in which to solve important national problems. In some aspects, Brasília's experiments succeeded; in others they failed. But both successes and failures derive from the same source, as both possibilities accompany genuine experiments.

If the spirit of Brasília is, therefore, that of experiment, is it not strange that this city of total design and improvisation, of innovation and contradiction, is now frozen in time? That is, the entire urban area of the Plano Piloto is legally preserved—entombed or *tombado*, as Brazilians call this preservation of patrimony—by local, national, and international layers of legal protection. If this experimental city has thus become a memorial, what memory does it record? To memorialize is never to tell the whole story. It is rather to select certain conditions that the memorializers want to preserve and ignore others. Thus, the spirit of a place—what the Romans called its *genius loci*—consists of what is both emplaced and displaced in memoriam. In these terms, what is the genius of Brasília, constructed in the backlands of Brazil in the late 1950s, and has its spirit been compromised by preservation? In what follows, I address these questions in turn.

Statecraft and Stagecraft

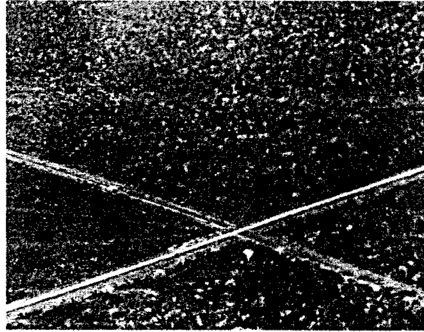
The Plano Piloto's basic residential units are all equal: same facade, same height, same facilities, all constructed on *pilotis* (columns), all provided with garages and constructed of the same material—which prevents the hateful differentiation of social classes; that is, all families share the same life together, the upper-echelon public functionary, the middle, and the lower.

As for the apartments themselves, some are larger and some are smaller in number of rooms. They are distributed, respectively, to families on the basis of the number of dependents they have. And because of this distribution and the

nonexistence of social class discrimination, the residents of a superquadra are forced to live as if in the sphere of one big family, in perfect social coexistence, which results in benefits for the children who grow up, play, and study in the same environment of sincere camaraderie, friendship, and wholesome upbringing. Since Brasília is the glorious cradle of a new civilization, the children raised on the plateau will construct the Brazil of tomorrow.[2]

This description of "perfect social coexistence" comes neither from the pages of a utopian novel, nor from the new world annals of Fourierite socialism. Rather, it is taken from the periodical of the state corporation (Novacap) that planned, built, and administered Brasília—from a "report" on living conditions in the new capital three years after its inauguration. Nevertheless, it presents the fundamentally utopian premise that the design and organization of Brasília were meant to transform Brazilian society. Moreover, it does so according to conventions of utopian discourse: by an implicit comparison with and negation of existing social conditions. In this case, the subtext is the rest of Brazil, where society is perniciously stratified into social classes, where access to city services and facilities is differentially distributed by wealth and race, and where residential organization and architecture are primary markers of social standing. Brasília is put forth not merely as the antithesis of this stratification, but also as its antidote, as the "cradle of a new civilization." Furthermore, planners assume what they wish to prove, namely, that the unequal distribution of advantage that orders urban life elsewhere in Brazil is already negated in Brasília.

This thesis of negation and invention is the premise that structures Brasília's foundation. It is at the core of what Brazilians meant when they referred to the spirit or idea of Brasília, epithets widely used during the pioneering phase of the city. As such, this idea crystallizes an important paradigm of Modernity. It proposes that the state, as a national government, can change society and manage the social by imposing an alternative future embodied in plans—in effect, that it can make a new people according to plan. Moreover, as a Modernist plan, this idea is millenarian. It proposes to transform an unwanted present (the rest of Brazil) by means of a future imagined as radically different. This millenarian modern exemplifies a kind of stagecraft that has come to define the statecraft of modern nation-building: modern states use planned public works to promote new forms of collective association and personal habit that constitute their projected nation.[3]

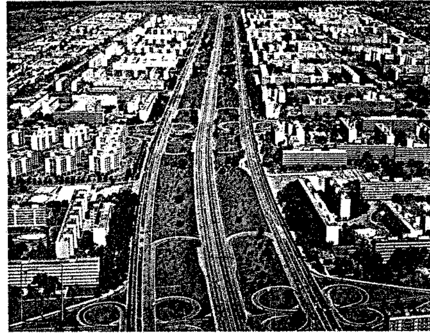


The crossing of Brasília's Monumental and Residential Axes, under construction in 1957, marks the location of the future capital in the wilderness of the Central Plateau.

Brasília's Modernism is exemplary of this statecraft. As the city's founder, President Juscelino Kubitschek, affirms:

> I have long been aware that modern architecture in Brazil is more than a mere aesthetic trend, and above all more than the projection into our culture of a universal movement. It has in fact put at our service the means with which to find the best possible solution of our city planning and housing problems. . . . It is, furthermore, a strong affirmative expression of our culture, perhaps the most original and precise expression of the creative intelligence of modern Brazil.[4]

Kubitschek's "affirmative relation" between modern architecture and modern Brazil lies precisely in using the former to stage the latter, as he demonstrated so effectively in his many city-building projects. Moreover, in explaining the selection



Aerial view of Brasília's South Wing, showing residential superquadras and row houses in 1981

of Lúcio Costa's Modernist Master Plan for Brasília, Kubitschek justifies both the utopian and the millenarian character of this stagecraft-as-statecraft: "Owing to the need to constitute a base of radiation of a pioneering system [of development] that would bring to civilization an unrevealed universe, [Brasília] had to be, perforce, a metropolis with different characteristics that would ignore the contemporary reality and would be turned, with all of its constitutive elements, toward the future."[5] Thus, Brasília's founders envisioned it as more than the symbol of a new age. They also intended Brasília's Modernist design and construction as the means to create that new age by transforming Brazilian society. They saw it as the means to invent a new nation for a new capital—a new nation to which this radically different city would then "logically belong" as Costa claimed.[6]

This project of transformation redefines Brazilian society according to the assumptions of a particular narrative of the Modern, that of the Modernist city proposed in the manifestos of CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne). In Brasília, this model is most clearly expressed in Costa's Master Plan and in the architecture of Oscar Niemeyer, the city's principal architect. But it is also embodied in many other aspects of the city's organization. From the 1920s until the 1970s (and in many places, until today), CIAM established a worldwide consensus among architects and planners on problems confronting the modern city. This consensus was especially shaped by the visionary architect Le Corbusier, whose writing framed its themes and whose urban design became its dominant grammar. As interpreted with world-renowned clarity by Costa and Niemeyer in the 1950s, Brasília is the most complete example of CIAM tenets ever constructed.

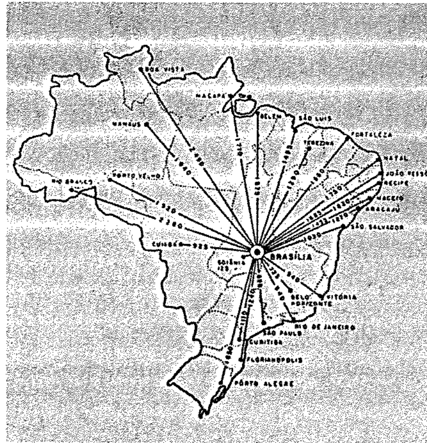
In subsequent sections, I discuss these tenets specifically in relation to Brasília's design; here, I want to examine their reproduction in Brazil. As is universally acknowledged, the project of Brasília is a blueprint-perfect embodiment of the CIAM model city. Moreover, its design is a brilliant reproduction of Le Corbusier's version of that model.[7] The point I want to make, however, is not that Brasília is merely a copy. Rather, it is that as a Brazilian rendition of CIAM's global Modernism, its copy is generative and original. Kubitschek argued precisely this point in the citation above. Brasília is a CIAM city inserted into what was the margins of modernity in the 1950s, inserted into the Modernist ambitions of a postcolony. In this context, the very purpose of the project was to capture the spirit of the modern by means of its likeness, its copy. It is this homeopathic relation to the model, brilliantly executed to be sure, that gives the copy its transformative power. In other words, its power resides precisely in the display of likeness. This display of an "original copy" constitutes the stagecraft that I referred to earlier as statecraft. It is the state in its theatrical form, in the sense of constructing itself by putting on spectacular public works. Under Kubitschek, Brazil showed itself to be modern by staging it. As the centers of decisive political, economic, and cultural power remained elsewhere in Brazil for at least a decade, Brasília's initial mission was above all gestural: to display modern architecture as the index of Brazil's own modernity as a new nation, establishing an elective affinity between the two.

Thus, Brasília's modernity is spectacular in the sense of being a staging of the state in its charismatic form. It is charismatic not only because Brasília is an animating center of nation-state building and state-directed modernizing and innova-

tion. It is also charismatic because Brasília's project proposes an equation between the condition of the ruler—in the form, metonymically, of his seat, the capital—and the state of rule. It proposes, in other words, to lead the rest of Brazil into a new era by example. This charismatic notion of statecraft is an ancient proposition, as historians and anthropologists of the state have shown.[8] It depends on establishing a correspondence between the good state of the ruler (the majesty of majesty) and the good state of the realm, in which the first becomes a prerequisite of the second. This relationship is homeopathic, one of establishing a likeness between two conditions. What makes this link plausible is the display of state—its public works, as I have called them—in which the stateliness of power is itself an ordering force. With Brasília, this charismatic conception of state finds a Modernist incarnation.

Innovation by Design

Brasília was designed to mirror to the rest of Brazil the modern nation it would become. At this scale of statecraft, Brasília is a charismatic center in doubly mimetic terms. On the one hand, it conveys its aura as an animating center of the modern by embodying in its own organization the CIAM plan of a radiant future. On the other, it animates by relaying to the national realm its idea of innovation. In this radiation, Brasília is a civilizing agent, the missionary of a new sense of national space, time, and purpose, colonizing the whole into which it has been inserted. This civilizing project is concisely represented in countless maps of Brazil produced in the 1950s and 1960s, showing the radiating network of highways that the government intended to construct between Brasília and state capitals. As a project of national development, it is a map of pure intention, since almost none of these roads existed at the time. As such, it represents the intended integration of the new nationalized space Brasília would generate.



Map from an elementary school textbook (Perugine et al. 1980) used to illustrate the idea of Brasília as the hub of national development

Corresponding to this new dimension of national space, Brasília implemented a new sense of national time. To build the city is just three and a half years, Novacap instituted a regime of round-the-clock construction. This regime of hard work became known throughout Brazil as the "rhythm of Brasília," "fifty years of progress in five." Breaking with the Portuguese meter of colonialism, this is a new rhythm, defined as 36 hours of nation-building a day—"12 during daylight, 12 at night, and 12 for enthusiasm." It expresses precisely the new space-time consciousness of Brasília's modernity, one that posits the possibility of accelerating time and of propelling Brazil into a radiant future.

The rhythm of Brasília thus reveals the development of a new kind of agency, confident that it can change the course of history through willful intervention, that it can abbreviate the path to the future by skipping over undesired stages of development. This Modernist agency expressed itself in a drive to innovate in all domains of Brasília's construction and organization. As I examine later, we find it not only in the city's architecture and planning, but also in its schools, hospitals, traffic system, community organization, property distribution, bureaucratic administration, music, theater, and more. We find this new sense of national agency, of rupture and innovation, concisely conveyed in newspaper and magazine advertisements of the period that celebrate the participation of

Brazil's industries in the capital's construction: "Here begins a new Brazil!—Rupturita Explosives Incorporated (a pioneer in the explosives industry)"; "Brasília: the dawn of a new era—Bimetal Incorporated"; "Brasília: the decisive mark of national progress—Mercedes Benz of Brazil."[9]

Thus, Brasília's Modernism signified Brazil's emergence as a modern nation because it simultaneously broke with the colonial legacies of underdevelopment as it posited an industrial modernity. The new architecture and planning attacked the styles of the past—the Iberian Baroque and the Neoclassical—that constituted one of the most visible symbols of a legacy the government sought to supersede. Literally, Modernism stripped these styles from building facades and city plans, demanding instead industrial-age building materials and an industrial aesthetic appropriate to "the new age." In planning, it privileged the automobile and the aesthetic of speed at a time when Brazil was embarking on a program of industrialization especially focused on the automobile industry. It also required centralized planning and the exercise of state power that appealed to the statist interests of the political elite.

In these terms of erasure and reinscription, the idea of Brasília proposes the possibility of an inversion in development: a radically new city would produce a new society to which it would then belong. The first premise of this inversion is that the plan for a new city can create a social order based on the values that motivate its design. The second premise projects the first as a blueprint for change in the context of national development. Both premises promised a new and modern agency of innovation for Brazil, and both motivated the building of Brasília. In what follows, I suggest that these premises generated two modes of planning and design in Brasília, and that these modes are fundamentally at odds. One is total design and master planning; the other is contingency design and improvisation. The latter is experimental by nature; the former was an experiment when tried in Brasília that soon overwhelmed and negated the other. Moreover, it engendered a set of social processes that paradoxically subverted the planners' utopian intentions.

Total Design

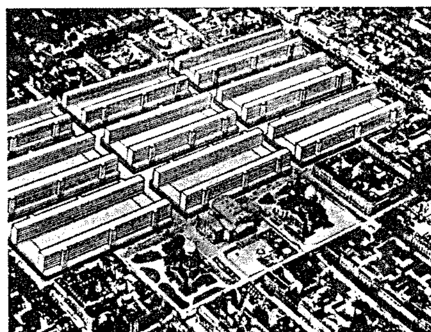
To create a new kind of society, Brasília redefines what its Master Plan calls the key functions of urban life, namely work, residence, recreation, and traffic. It directs this redefinition according to the tenets of the CIAM model city. CIAM manifestos call for national states to assert the priority of collective interests over private. They promote state planning over what they call the "ruthless rule of capitalism," by imposing on the chaos of existing cities a new type of urbanism based on CIAM master plans. CIAM's overarching strategy for change is totalization: CIAM its model city imposes a totality of new urban conditions that dissolves any conflict between the imagined new society and the existing one in the imposed coherence of total order. Precisely because of its emphasis on the state as supreme planning power, state-building elites of every political persuasion have embraced the CIAM model of urban development, as its phenomenal spread around the world attests.

One of the principle ways by which CIAM design achieves its totalization of city life is to organize the entire cityscape in terms of a new kind of spatial logic. It is not the only way, but I use it to illustrate both the nature of total design and one of its basic objectives: the subversion of premodern and especially Baroque urbanism. Visitors to Brasília often observe that they are disoriented because the city has no street corners. Their absence is but one indication of a distinctive and radical feature of Brasília's CIAM modernity, namely, the absence of streets themselves. In place of street corners and their intersections, Brasília substitutes the traffic circle; in place of streets, high-speed avenues and residential cul-de-sacs; in place of sidewalk pedestrians, the automobile; and in place

of the system of public spaces that streets traditionally support, the structure of a completely different urbanism. At the scale of an entire city, Brasília thus realizes the objective of CIAM planning to redefine the urban function of traffic. It does so by eliminating what it calls the corridor street, the street edged with continuous building facades. Although one might not imagine the importance of traffic planning in these terms, this elimination has overwhelming consequences for urbanism: It subverts the system of space-building (or solid-void) relations that structures premodern urbanism and replaces it with another.

In its critique of the cities and society of European capitalism, CIAM Modernism proposed the elimination of the corridor street as a prerequisite for modern urban organization—a plan of attack Le Corbusier labeled "the death of the street" in 1929. CIAM vilifies the street as a place of disease and criminality and as a structure of private property that impedes modern development. More consequentially, however, Modernist architecture attacks the street because it constitutes an architectural organization of the public and private domains of social life that it seeks to overturn.

The corridor street is the architectural context of the outdoor public life of preindustrial cities, common to both Brazil and Europe. This context is constituted in terms of a contrast between the street system of public spaces (voids) and the residential system of private buildings (solids). Traditionally, architects are trained to structure this contrast in terms of an organization of its solids and voids into figure and ground relations. Generally, in premodern urbanism, streets and squares are framed by facades built edge-to-edge and perceived as having the shape these frames make. Thus, streets and squares are spaces that have form, usually perceived as a figure of rectangular volume. This figural perception creates the impression that the continuous building facades are the interior walls of outdoor rooms, the public rooms of the city. The street-walls are, accordingly, ornamented, and the street-rooms furnished with benches, sculpture, fountains, and so forth. The spatial principle of this urbanism is, therefore, that streets and squares are figural voids in contrast to the ground of the solids around them.

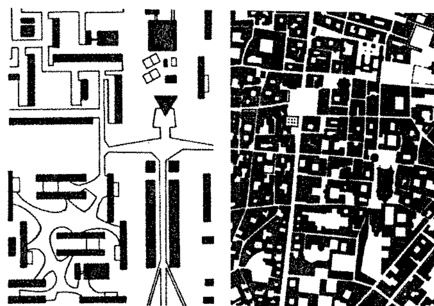


Unrealized project for central Berlin by architect Ludwig Hilberseimer, 1927

This elemental organization of solids and voids has dominated Occidental urbanism for 2,500 years. It developed its recognizable character in ancient Greece and its fullest elaboration in the Baroque cities of Europe. It must suffice here to observe that in this preindustrial urbanism, both space and building are reversibly both figure and ground.[10] Although space is consistently figural and building is ground, these relations are easily reversed to signify public monuments and civic institutions. This reversal is the key rhetorical principle of the preindustrial architectural ordering of public and private.

Modernism breaks decisively with this traditional system of architectural signification. Whereas preindustrial Baroque cities (such as Ouro Prêto in Brazil) provide an order of public and private values by juxtaposing architectural conventions of repetition (ground) and exception (figure), the Modernist city (such as Brasília) is conceived as the antithesis both of this mode of representation and of its represented sociopolitical order. In the Modernist city, vast areas of continuous space without exception form the perceptual ground against which the solids of buildings emerge as sculptural figures. There is no relief from this

Figure ground plan of an east-west section of Brasília's South Wing, showing residential superquadras and commercial sectors around 1960.



absolute division of architectural labor: Space is always treated as continuous and never as figural; buildings always as sculptural and never as background. The consequences of this total inversion are profound. By asserting the primacy of open space, volumetric clarity, pure form, and geometric abstraction, Modernism not only initiates a new vocabulary of form. More radically, it inverts the entire mode of perceiving architecture, turning it inside out—as if the figural solids of the Modernist city have been produced in the mold of the figural voids of preindustrial urbanism. Furthermore, the Modernist city negates the reversals of the traditional code by insisting on the immutability of the terms: By establishing the absolute supremacy of continuous nonfigural void, it transforms the ambivalence of Baroque planning into a monolithic spatial order. Reversals are now impossible. Modernism has imposed a total and totalizing new urban order.[11]

Complementing its theory of objective change, the CIAM model also proposes a subjective transformation of existing conditions. Borrowing from other avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century, it uses techniques of shock to force a subjective appropriation of the new social order inherent in its plans. These techniques emphasize decontextualization, defamiliarization, and dehistoricization. Their central premise of transformation is that the new architecture/urban design creates set pieces of radically different experience that destabilize, subvert, and then regenerate the surrounding fabric of social life. It is a viral notion of revolution, a theory of decontextualization in which the radical qualities of something totally out of context infect and colonize that which surrounds it. This something may be a single building conceived as a fragment of the total plan. Or, it may be an entire city designed as an exemplar, as in the case of Brasília. Either way, the radical fragment is supposed to create new forms of social experience, collective association, personal habit, and perception. At the same time, it is supposed to preclude those forms deemed undesirable by negating previous social and architectural expectations about urban life. As the Novacap "report" cited above asserts, "residents of a superquadra are *forced* to live as if. . . ."

Brasília's design implements the CIAM premises of objective and subjective transformation by both architectural and social means. On the one hand, its Master Plan displaces institutions traditionally centered in a private sphere of social life to a new state-sponsored public sphere of residence and work. On the other, its new architecture renders illegible the taken-for-granted representation of these institutions. Its strategy of total design is thus a double defamiliarization. As a result, for example, the functions of work and residence in Brasília lose their traditional separation when the latter is assigned on the basis of work affiliation, as it was generally until 1965 and still is in some sectors. Hence, Bank of Brazil employees reside in one superquadra, those of the Air Force Ministry in another, those of Congress in yet another, and so forth. In addition, these functions become architecturally indistinguishable as the buildings of work and residence receive similar massing and fenestration and thereby lose their traditional symbolic differentiation.

Brasília's Modernist Master Planning is a comprehensive approach to restructuring urban life precisely because it advances proposals aimed at both the public and the private domains of society. Its proposal for the private realm centers on a new type of domestic architecture and

Left: Rua Tiradentes in Ouro Prêto. Right: Superquadra apartment block, SQS 108-Block E, in Brasília

residential unit that organizes residence into homogeneous sectors, structured by a concept of "collective" dwelling. This plan is best embodied in the superquadras of the Plano Piloto, a type called the Collective Dwelling. The word "collective" refers to the sharing of common facilities, such as schools, administration buildings, social clubs, green areas, and commercial structures. As one might expect, such an experiment in living receives mixed evaluations from residents. My study of the model superquadras (South 108, for example) concluded that especially residents with younger children find them compelling.[12] However, many other residents complain that the elimination of informal social spaces traditionally found in Brazilian homes—the *copa*, balcony, and veranda—defamiliarizes the superquadra apartments. Moreover, people frequently complained that their gridded glass facades negate expressions of individual status and personality in an attempt to communicate an egalitarian, rational social order. For many, the outcome of this design is both a sense of isolation inside the apartments and yet an abandonment of the superquadra's green areas.[13]

In sum, Brasília's Modernist design achieves a similar kind of defamiliarization of public and private values in both the civic and the residential realms. On the one hand, it restructures the city's public life by eliminating the street. On the other, it restructures the residential by reducing the social space of the private apartment in favor of a new type of residential collectivity in which the role of the individual is symbolically minimized. Together, these strategies constitute a profound estrangement of residential life as Brazilians know it.

These intended defamiliarizations are brutally effective. Most people who move to Brasília experience them with trauma. In fact, the first generation of inhabitants coined a special expression for this shock of total design, *brasilite* or "Brasília-itis." As one resident told me, "Everything in Brasília was different. It was a shock, an illusion, because you didn't understand where people lived, or shopped, or worked, or socialized." Another said, "even the tombstones are standardized." Another common instance of disorientation is the sense of exposure residents experience inside the transparent glass facades of their Modernist apartment buildings. With considerable irony, they nicknamed these glass boxes "the *candango*'s television set"—meaning that a poor man (the *candango*, Brasília's pioneering construction worker) can find nightly entertainment by standing in front of an apartment block to watch the interior drama of middle-class life revealed on the big screen of the illuminated facade. In response to this perceived assault on their privacy, which some link to the moralizing gaze of a new state-sponsored public sphere, residents resist by putting up every kind of visual barrier—curtains, blinds, potted plants, even birdcages. Yet the sense, if not the fact, of transparency remains. Thus, Brasília's

Modernism also works its intended subversion at an intimate scale of daily life. Harmonized in plan and elevation, Brasília's total design created a radically new world, giving it a form that possessed its own agenda of social change.

Contingency Design

I suggested earlier that the project of Brasília generated two modes of design and planning. Although both were experimental and innovative, they were fundamentally at odds. One is Modernist total design. As I have shown, this mode attempts to overcome the contingency of modern experience by totalizing it, that is, by fixing the present as a totally conceived plan based on an imagined future. This kind of design is always already preserved by the very completeness of the plans themselves, which have a statute-like character as a set of instructions. In the case of Brasília, Costa's Master Plan actually became law with the inauguration of the capital. Establishing the city's inaugural legal and administrative organization, its first Organic Law declared that "any alteration in the Plano Piloto . . . depends on authorization in federal law."[14]

The second mode of design and planning is based on contingency itself. It improvises and experiments as a means of dealing with the uncertainty of present conditions. Contingency design works with plans that are always incomplete. Its means are suggested by present possibilities for an alternative future, not by an imagined and already scripted future. It is a mode of design based on imperfect knowledge, incomplete control, and lack of resources, which incorporates ongoing conflict and contradiction as constitutive elements. In this sense, it has a significant insurgent aspect. I will illustrate contingency planning with three examples from the construction period of Brasília. The first concerns the worker himself as *bricoleur*; the second, the contrast between the totally regulated construction zone and the market city that developed on its fringes; and the third, the development of illegal settlements as a reaction to the government's planned occupation.

In late 1956, Novacap divided the area of the future Federal District into two zones of planned but temporary occupation based on a spatial organization of work. One zone was reserved for construction camps that would build the city and one for commercial establishments that would provide services and supplies to the work force. The need to build Brasília quickly and the lack of skilled labor created a work regime of improvisation and ingenuity in both zones. In this regime, Brasília's workers became famous as *quebra-galhos* ("trouble-shooters, handymen"), a type of *bricoleur* ready to tackle any job with great ingenuity but limited resources; or, as one *candango* joked, "ready to undertake tasks for which he has not been sufficiently prepared." Moreover, the shortage of skilled laborers meant that unskilled workers could move into a category of skilled labor and higher pay with relative ease. Nearly every *candango* I interviewed told the same story of unlimited hours of work, rapid advancement based on audacity, and learning on the job.[15]

As Novacap was constructing the Plano Piloto to accommodate the government and its civil servants transferred from Rio de Janeiro, it wanted to preclude the possibility that this labor force might take root in shanties on the site. Therefore, with statelike authority and its own security force, Novacap strictly controlled access to and accommodations within the construction zone. However, if the construction zone was marshaled like a boot camp, Novacap established a commercial zone for private initiative at its edge that grew as its opposite under a laissez-faire policy. This site became known as the Free City (Cidade Livre), though officially called the Provisional Pioneer Nucleus or Núcleo Bandeirante. The government encouraged entrepreneurs to supply the construction effort at their own risk and profit, and, after the city's inauguration, to become its

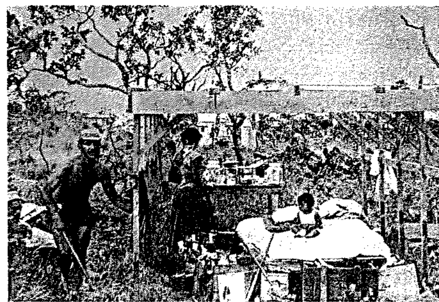
commercial and service population. To that end, it offered entrepreneurs two incentives: free land and no taxes for four years. The combination of laissez-faire governance and temporary wooden buildings turned the Free City into a veritable frontier town of abundant cash and ambition. However, Novacap's commercial contracts stipulated that at the end of the four-year period it had the right to raze the entire city to the ground. With a turn of phrase still famous in the Free City, the president of Novacap declared, "In April 1960, I will send the tractors to flatten everything."

Thus, in classic imperial fashion, Novacap created a kind of bazaar at the gates of its noncommercial capital. On the one hand, those whom it recruited for jobs in construction were billeted in regimented camps as the work crews of a public building project. On the other, those recruited for their capital investments in all activities except construction populated the Free City and dominated its capitalist economy. It was called a Free City precisely because it grew in an area free of regulations that applied elsewhere. In contrast to the construction zone, it was immediately accessible to all: to those just off the bus, to those awaiting documentation for construction work, to those rags-to-riches dreamers seeking their frontier Eldorado, to those whose husbands and fathers were laboring in the camps. All could enter the Free City freely to find a place to live and work—freely meaning, of course, in accordance with individual means. The Free City was thus a capitalist city, organized around contingency and risk, on the fringes of a totally planned economy.

Another crucial difference between the Free City and the construction zone was that the latter was overwhelmingly male and occupied mostly by men who lived in barracks without families. Ultimately, the consequences of this difference fundamentally altered the planned organization of the Federal District. The two encampments for Novacap employees were exceptions, as both officials and manual workers had the privilege of family residence. As a result, 89 percent of Novacap officials and 82 percent of its workers brought their families to Brasília by 1959. For the rest of the almost 17,000 men lodged in the private sector construction camps, 91 percent lived without families, although 34 percent of them were married. In all, there were only about 1,450 families in these camps, mostly those of the managers and a few skilled workers.[16] To be sure, the rest of the married workers were not less likely to want to live with their families. For them, there were only two options: to rent accommodations in the Free City for their families, or to build unauthorized dwellings for them somewhere in the countryside around the construction camps.

Of the two, the latter became the more common, and, after 1958, the only viable option. The tenuous balance between housing supply and demand in the Free City ruptured that year, when a massive influx of drought victims from the northeast of Brazil overwhelmed the limited supply of accommodations. Rents and overcrowding soared. Both migrants and speculators responded by building huge numbers of unauthorized shacks. Rather than allow this uncontrolled growth, Novacap prohibited additional expansion of the Free City after December 1959. It even attempted to slow migration by erecting what turned out to be an ineffective police cordon around the city. As a result of this housing crisis, workers who wanted to bring families to Brasília had little choice but to become squatters by seizing land on which to build illegal houses. Most seizures were multifamily occupations. The larger ones were called *vilas*, the most important being Vila Sara Kubitschek (named after the president's wife), Vila Amaury, Vila Planalto, and Vila do IAPI.[17] Improvised by *candangos* to lodge their families, these illegal *vilas* were so important in the settlement of the Federal District that by May 1959 they contained

Núcleo Bandeirante, known as the Free City, in 1957.
·OM: A *candango* family builds an unauthorized
lling in the scrub brush near the Plano Piloto con-
ction sites in 1956



over 28 percent of its population. Moreover, as we will see, these insurgent settlements soon became legalized as precisely the kind of a poor periphery around the Plano Piloto that the Master Plan prohibited (as in Article 17).

The *candangos* were not the only ones to risk illegal settlement in response to the government's planned occupation. In this regard, the fate of Novacap's officials is especially significant. These administrators, architects, and engineers were the supreme commanders in Brasília. They formed an elite cadre of pioneers, zealously dedicated to its spirit as a mission of national development. Nevertheless, although they combined nearly absolute power, they lacked an essential component. According to the state's plan to transfer the federal bureaucracy—elaborated by the Grupo de Trabalho de Brasília (GTB) in Rio de Janeiro—Novacap officials had no predetermined rights to reside in the city, as most had been recruited for the preinaugural construction and not for the postinaugural bureaucracy. Thus, they found themselves without inaugural rights to the city they built and ruled and to which 89 percent had already brought families.

In August 1958, however, a "corrective measure" presented itself. The Popular Housing Foundation completed 500 row houses located between W-3 and W-4 in the South Wing, based on a Niemeyer design. In the GTB's original distribution plan, these houses were designated for lower-echelon functionaries (e.g., drivers, janitors, typists) transferred with large families. Although their design expresses a middle-class social organization, these row houses were thus intended as *casas populares* (popular-class houses) for the lower-income residents. Indeed, at their inaugural ceremonies in August, President Kubitschek affirmed that "what we call popular houses in other places, housing for people of few resources, in Brasília constitute palaces contested for by all the residents and workers as a prize for their efforts."[18] In fact, so prized were these completed houses that 500 of Novacap's elite families immediately and illegitimately occupied all of them, usurping transferee rights. Ultimately, no one disputed Novacap's usurpation. There was, in any case, no one to evict them.

This "official seizure" had profound consequences for Brasília's social structure. It forced the GTB to scuttle its planned social stratification of residence in which the superquadras in the 100–300 bands were reserved for middle- and upper-echelon officials, and the W-3 houses and 400 band superquadras for those in the lower ranks. With the W-3 houses occupied, the GTB had to change its housing assignments and distribution criteria. Instead of a stratified distribution, it had to adopt an egalitarian one based on criteria of need and a pool of recipients now including all levels of functionaries. Out of this distribution emerged the famous superquadra blocks of Brasília's postinaugural years in which the upper and lower classes lived side by side. This distribution lasted only five years, until the government sold the apartments on the open market. Ironically, however, through an unintended concordance of contingencies, the initial distribution

created a radical social structure more in keeping with the one originally envisioned by the utopian architects.[19]

Brazilianization

Built Brasília thus resulted from the interaction of both modes of planning: the total and totalizing, the contingent and insurgent. In most cases, however, the former soon overwhelmed the latter. I will use the example of the illegal periphery to demonstrate. The government planned to recruit a labor force to build the capital, but to deny it residential rights in the city it built for the civil servants from Rio. By 1958, however, it became clear that many workers intended to remain and that almost 30 percent of them had already rebelled against their planned exclusion by becoming squatters in illegal settlements. Yet the government did not incorporate the *candangos* into the Plano Piloto, even though it was nearly empty at inauguration. The government found this solution unacceptable because inclusion would have violated the preconceived model that Brasília's "essential purpose [was to be] an administrative city with an absolute predominance of the interests of public servants."[20] Rather, under mounting pressure of the *candango* rebellion, and in contradiction of the Master Plan, the administration decided to create legal Satellite Cities, in which *candangos* of modest means would have the right to acquire lots and to which Novacap would remove all squatters. In rapid succession, the government founded Taguatinga (1958), Sobradinho (1960), and Gama (1960), and legalized the permanent status of the Free City in situ, under the name Núcleo Bandeirante (1961). In authorizing the creation of these Satellite Cities, the government was in each case giving legal foundation to what had in fact already been usurped: the initially denied residential rights that *candangos* appropriated by forming squatter settlements. Thus, Brasília's legal periphery has a subversive origin in land seizures and contingency planning.

To remain faithful to their model, the planners could not let the legal periphery develop autonomously. They had to counter contingency, in other words, by organizing the periphery on the model of the center. To do so, they adopted what we might call a strategy of retotalization, especially with regard to the periphery's urban planning, political-administrative structure, and recruitment of settlers. That model had two principal objectives: to keep civil servants in the center and others in the periphery, and to maintain a "climate of tranquillity" that eliminated the turbulence of political mobilization.[21] Given these objectives, the planners had little choice but to use the mechanisms of social stratification and repression that are constitutive of the rest of Brazil they sought to exclude. First, they devised a recruitment policy that preselected who would go to either the center or the periphery and that would give bureaucrats preferential access to the Plano Piloto. Second, in organizing administrative relations between center and periphery, planners denied the Satellite Cities political representation. Through this combination of political subordination and preferential recruitment, of disenfranchisement and disprivilege, planners created a dual social order that was both legally and spatially segregated. Ironically, it was this stratification and repression and not the illegal actions of the squatters that more profoundly Brazilianized Brasília.

As we might guess, the reiteration of the orders of the center in the periphery created similar housing problems there. These problems led, inevitably, to new land seizures and to the formation of new illegal peripheries—in the plural because now each satellite spawned its own fringe of illegal settlements. Moreover, by the same processes, some of these seizures are legitimated, leading to the creation of yet additional Satellite Cities. These cycles of rebellion and legitimation, illegal action and legalization, contingency planning and retotalization, continue to this day.

Chaparral, a squatter settlement near the Satellite of Taguatinga

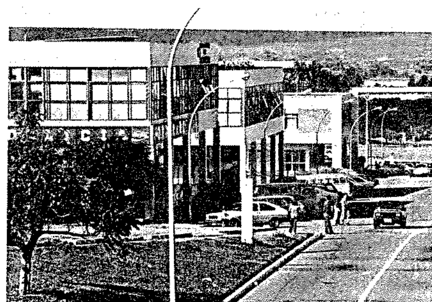
A striking illustration of the perpetuation of Brasília's contradictory development is that, even today, the Plano Piloto remains more than half empty while only containing 14 percent of the Federal District's total population. This comparison strongly suggests that the government continues to expand the legal periphery rather than incorporate poor migrants into the Plano Piloto.[22]

When we consider the Plano Piloto itself, the terms of its Brazilianization are somewhat different. Especially among the first generation, residents tried two strategies to overcome their sense of estrangement in Brasília's new world. Some tried to reassert the familiar values and conventions of a more heterogeneous outdoor public urbanity. For example, in a few of the local commercial sectors of the South Wing, residents rejected the lack of street life by repudiating the antistreet design. They put store entrances back on the curb rather than on the proposed superquadra (non-street) side of the buildings. In so doing, they tried to reconstitute the life of the market street where it had been architecturally and legally denied. However, their success was limited. In the absence of a continuous system of streets and sidewalks, the front-back reversals were isolated. In any case, the government precluded this "deformation" of the Plan when it later built the local commercial sectors of the North Wing. Similarly, residents rejected the transparency of glass facades not merely by putting up barriers but by demanding an architecture of opaque walls and balconies in later superquadras.

Most accepted privatization, however, as the means to create new and more selective social groupings. An example of this second strategy is that rather than try to reform the Master Plan, many among Brasília's elite (including city planners and officials) rejected the residential concept of the superquadra altogether. They moved out of their Plano Piloto apartments and created their own neighborhoods of individual houses and private clubs on the other side of the lake. In so doing, they contradicted Article 20 of the Master Plan, which stipulated that the lake area remain free of "residential neighborhoods." The existence of these elite neighborhoods repudiates the aims of the Master Plan to achieve social change by instituting a new type of residential organization. Whereas the superquadra concretizes a set of egalitarian prescriptions, especially through standardization, the houses of these elite neighborhoods often compete with each other in ostentation, using a bricolage of historical styles. While significant in its own right as a counterstyle, this display fractures every tenet of the Modernist aesthetic and social program of the Master Plan. By building exclusive neighborhoods and clubs, these elites contradicted the intentions of Brasília's residential organization. Without their support, important aspects of its proposed collective structure collapsed.

Entombment

We have seen that the history of Brasília's development is one of interaction between its total and contingent planning. Mostly, however, the total overwhelmed the contingent, as planners insist on reiterating the original model in the face of insurgent developments. In a few cases, such as the front/back reversal of stores and the settlement of the periphery, contingency planning made lasting changes to the Master Plan. However, even these insurgent alternatives were retotalized, as planners either neutralized their significance by isolating them (the first case) or subsumed them



LEFT: Storebacks transformed into storefronts in Brasil Local Commercial Sector 108 South. RIGHT: Local Commercial Sector 204 North in Brasília

into the whole by organizing their development according to original principles and objectives (the second).

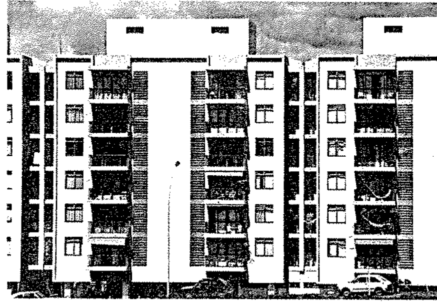
With these conclusions in mind, we can return to a question posed at the beginning: If the spirit of Brasília is that of innovation, experiment, and risk, is this insistence on totalizing the contingent—that is, on perpetuating one experimental moment at the expense of all others—a betrayal of that spirit? Even though planners may think they are furthering the project of Brasília through this insistence, are they misguided in imposing one model that was experimental in the 1950s but that now prevents subsequent generations of Brazilians from using Brasília as *their* field of experimentation? After all, the spirit of Brasília inspired Costa's and Niemeyer's particular expressions of it and, therefore, predates them. If so, then the idea of Brasília cannot be subsumed and completed by those particular embodiments. Must it not, as well, continue to inspire others?

Brasília is today preserved by various levels of law. What is "entombed" is the original urban conception of Costa's Master Plan (1957), including the Plano Piloto and the Lake Districts but not the periphery. Indeed, Brasília was born preserved when the Master Plan became law with the city's inauguration (Article 38 of Law 3751, April 1960). Since then, it has been protected by three additional levels of law. In 1987, the local government of the Federal District regulated Article 38 through Decree 10,829, giving that article new specificity and application. Also in 1987, Brasília received unprecedented international protection: UNESCO guaranteed its preservation by inscribing the Plano Piloto (including the Lake Districts) in its List of World Cultural and Natural Heritage. It is the largest urban area in the world and the only contemporary living city so preserved. Moreover, it one of the few twentieth-century sites selected for the list, along with Auschwitz, Hiroshima's Peace Memorial, and the Bauhaus at Weimar and Dessau. Finally, the Brazilian federal government declared Brasília *tombada* in 1990, inscribing it in the Book of Historical Preservation (entry 532), an inscription regulated by acts of the Secretariat of National Historical and Artistic Patrimony (SPHN) and the Brazilian Institute of Cultural Patrimony (IBPC). In the words of the official publication of the IBPC, Brasília's preservation means that:

> Any alteration in the height of buildings, in the layout of roads, avenues, and lots, in the use and function of lots, in the unbuilt green areas, within the perimeter preserved, should, on principle, be avoided. Necessary alterations should be profoundly studied and carefully executed to guarantee the preservation of the essential characteristics of the Plano Piloto and its quality of life.[23]

To disagree, one could reasonably argue that the exceptional "quality of life" of Brasília is rooted in a history of extraordinary inequality and stratification (exceptional even by Brazilian standards), that it is based on exclusive privileges, and that it costs the nation an inordinate amount to maintain for the benefit of a half-empty

: Second generation superquadras revealing the rejec-
ı of glass facades in favor of opaque walls and bal-
ies. BOTTOM: House in Brasília's South Lake district



Plano Piloto in relation to an increasingly populous and poor periphery. One could claim that legislation that fixes such a "quality of life" is but a means to preserve the privilege of elites at the expense of others—indeed, that it establishes a tyranny of elites through law and planning councils, and that it empowers a gerontocracy of founders to maintain their vision while depriving younger generations of citizens the opportunity to define their own. One could argue the pros and cons of these assertions at great length with respect to Brasília, without necessarily reaching a completely satisfactory conclusion.

I prefer to conclude by noting that there is no mention in the pronouncements about Brasília's preservation of what is to my mind the most important of its "essential characteristics," namely, its spirit of invention. If that spirit is essential, and if preservation is intended to protect the essential, then at the very least *tombamento* should preserve Brasília as a field of experimentation, indeed of continuous innovation. It should preserve the city as special place in Brazil where that kind of risk is possible. Freezing Brasília at one moment betrays that spirit and turns it into a ghost.

This suggestion does not in any way mean "letting market forces take over" from government planning in Brasília. Though privatizing certain urban issues would be an important experiment, "the market" can never be a blanket solution to urban problems. Rather, my suggestion means sponsoring controlled experiments in urbanism in all aspects, from housing to governance to transportation, that will out of necessity respond to Costa's Master Plan but that may also depart from it in considering new problems. In this way, planners could preserve many aspects of the CIAM Modernist city, while allowing Brasília to become a city layered with other kinds of urbanisms. In fact, what makes cities like Rome, Paris, and New York most interesting is that they are not based on one model but are layered with the visions of each generation that lived them. This juxtaposition makes visible the vitality of city life as debates about urbanism itself. The density of this record produces cities rich in experience and rewards those who know them. The vast and empty spaces of Brasília need to contain such juxtapositions, whose frisson is the best means not only to nurture the founding idea of Brasília as experiment, but also to perpetuate the importance of its initial experiment, its Costa/Niemeyer/CIAM Modernist urbanism.

At the very least, memorializing Brasília must mean re-presenting its premises as they developed through both total and contingent/insurgent modes of design. Presenting that dialogue between the modes of Brasília's design is a challenge worthy of a memorial to the real history of the city. It would also provide an important educational project for all concerned with urbanism. As it is now, Brasília's preservation tells only part of the story, that of the elite planners and architects but not that of the workers who built the city but who rebelled against their exclusion. It also neglects the story of the officials who developed new but not architectural proposals for urban life. And it preserves an exaggerated, state-sponsored social and spatial stratification.

Furthermore, Brasília's preservation laws are in practice often circumvented by negligence or corruption, a common fate of administration by statute. Thus, reliance on these laws fails to protect the city from the ills of misuse and speculation. For example, growth in the North Hotel Sector neither conforms to the Master Plan, nor follows the logic of market competition, nor constitutes a new experiment in planning. Rather, it is a chaotic and corrupted development. If in theory entombment compromises Brasília's spirit, in practice it does not effectively prevent the corruption of its body.

In the 1950s, Brasília dared to be an innovation in urbanism. Like most significant experiments, it took the risk of submitting itself to public evaluation. That I criticize aspects of its development does not diminish my admiration for its foundation. To the contrary, I have argued that it is important to commemorate the particular experiment of its founders, but only in the context of memorializing that greater idea of modernity as experiment and risk that is the spirit of Brasília.

Notes

1. Frei Vicente do Salvador, *História do Brasil, 1500–1627* (São Paulo: Cia. Melhoramentos, 1931), p. 19.
2. *Brasília* (Journal of Companhia Urbanizadora da Nova Capital do Brasil—Novacap) (1963), p. 15.
3. For an extensive discussion of this Modernist political and planning project, see my study of Brasília, on which I rely for various passages of this essay. This study was based on several years of fieldwork in Brasília. James Holston, *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasília* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
4. Stamo Papadaki, *Oscar Niemeyer* (New York: George Braziller, 1960), p. 7.
5. Juscelino Kubitschek, *Por Que Construí Brasília* (Rio de Janeiro: Bloch Editores, 1975), pp. 62–63.
6. Lúcio Costa, "Razões da nova arquitetura," *Arte em Revista* 4 (1980), p. 15.
7. See Holston, *The Modernist City*, pp. 31–58 for proof and discussion of the Le Corbusian derivation.
8. For example, see Quentin Skinner, "The State," *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, Terence Ball, James Farr, and Russell L. Hanson, eds., (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989) for an analysis of the conceptual foundations of the modern European state, in part inspired by Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980).
9. These citations come from media material in the personal archive of the author.
10. Holston, *The Modernist City*, pp. 101–44.
11. Although I argue that Modernist urban planning is antithetical of Baroque planning in theory, and eliminates it in practice, some observers suggest that Niemeyer's architecture has a Baroque aspect. In particular, they point to the curving and "lyrical" lines of his massing and to the iconic quality of some of his forms. The Cathedral in Brasília is a good example of the latter, readily recognizable as a "crown of thorns" or "two hands in prayer," as many people describe it. I would only argue that in theory all Modernist buildings are figural and that most Baroque buildings are not iconic. That some of Niemeyer's are especially iconic says more about their ability to communicate quickly and effectively as "one-liners" than about any deeper Baroque sensibility.
12. Holston, *The Modernist City*, pp. 163–87.
13. The reduction of family social space and expression of individuality is consistent with Modernist objectives to reduce the role of private apartments in the lives of residents and, correspondingly, to encourage the use of collective facilities. As Le Corbusier argued, "The problem was no longer that of the family cell itself, but that of the group; it was no longer that of the individual lot but that of development." Charles-Edouard Jeanneret Le Corbusier, *La Charte d'Athenes* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1957), p. 16.
14. As in Article 38. The first Organic Law of Brasília, Law 3751 of April 13, 1960, is also known as the Lei Santiago Dantas after its principle sponsor in Congress.
15. I should also stress that the need to build Brasília at breakneck speed also created serious job hazards. The combination of exceptionally long work hours,

deadline pressures, and lack of adequate training made work-related accidents and deaths progressively more common.

16. These and subsequent demographic data come from IBGE (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística), *Censo Experimental de Brasília* (Rio de Janeiro: IBGE, 1959). It was officially called the Experimental Census because, like so much in Brasília, it was designed to test new methods and concepts that would be developed as national guidelines.
17. That these land seizures were the only viable places of residence near the construction sites for poor families is indicated in the demographic profile of the only *vila* surveyed in the 1959 census: over 99 percent of the population of Vila Amaury lived in family households, the highest incidence of family residence in any of the new settlements in the Federal District and comparable only to that of the preexisting cities of Planaltina (97 percent) and Brazlândia (100 percent). IBGE 1959, p. 103.
18. *Arquitetura e Engenharia, Brasília*, special edition (July–August 1960), p. 148.
19. In addition to Novacap, other federal institutions had the task of constructing the superquadras. The officials of these institutes were, like Novacap's elite, dedicated pioneers who were deprived of postinaugural residential rights. However, they had much less power. After the inauguration, they continued to live in the wooden shacks of the construction camps, while the transferred civil servants got the apartments they had built. Finally, they too carried out an illegal occupation to gain what they thought they deserved. In a dramatic raid, IPASE officials seized the last apartment blocks the institutes would build in Brasília, just before they were distributed to others.
20. Ministry of Justice (Minister Carlos Cyrillo, Jr., Jayme de Assis Almeida, et al.), *Brasília: Medidas Legislativas Sugeridas à Comissão Mista pelo Ministro da Justiça e Negócios Interiores* (Rio de Janeiro: Departamento de Imprensa Nacional, 1959), p. 9.
21. Ibid.
22. The Plano Piloto was planned for a maximum population of 500,000. As of 1996, the date of the most recent findings, it has a population of 199,000. If we include the Lake districts, we add another 54,000 residents, for a total that is still just half Brasília's planned population. Moreover, the demographic imbalance between center and periphery has only worsened with time. At inauguration, the Plano Piloto had 48 percent of the total District population and the periphery (both Satellite Cities and rural settlements) had 52 percent. In 1970, the distribution was 29 percent to 71 percent; in 1980, 25 percent to 75 percent; in 1990, 16 percent to 84 percent; and in 1996, 14 percent to 86 percent. IBGE 1996.
23. IBPC (Instituto Brasileiro do Patrimônio Cultural), Patrimônio Cultural (Boletim Informativo Bimestral da 14ª Coordenção Regional do IBPC), special edition (November–December 1992), p. 10.

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