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## Places

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El Dorado

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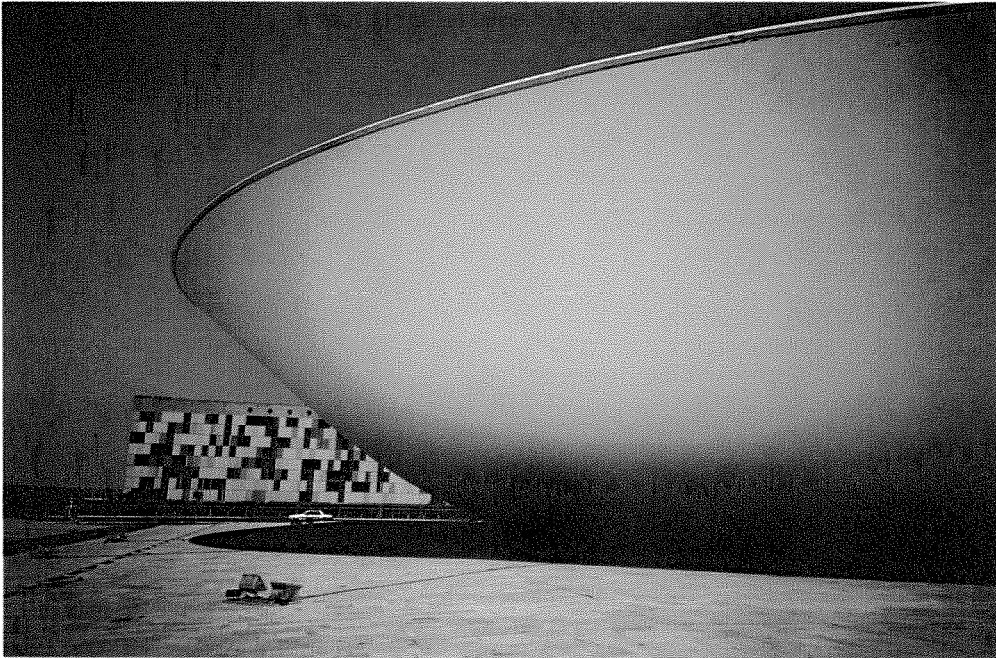
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# El Dorado

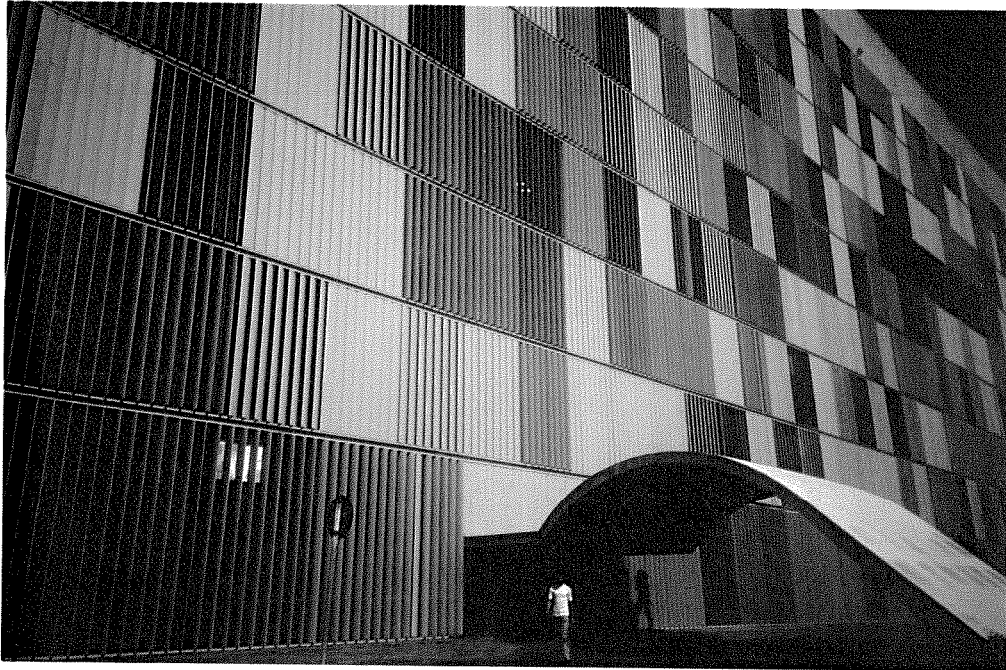
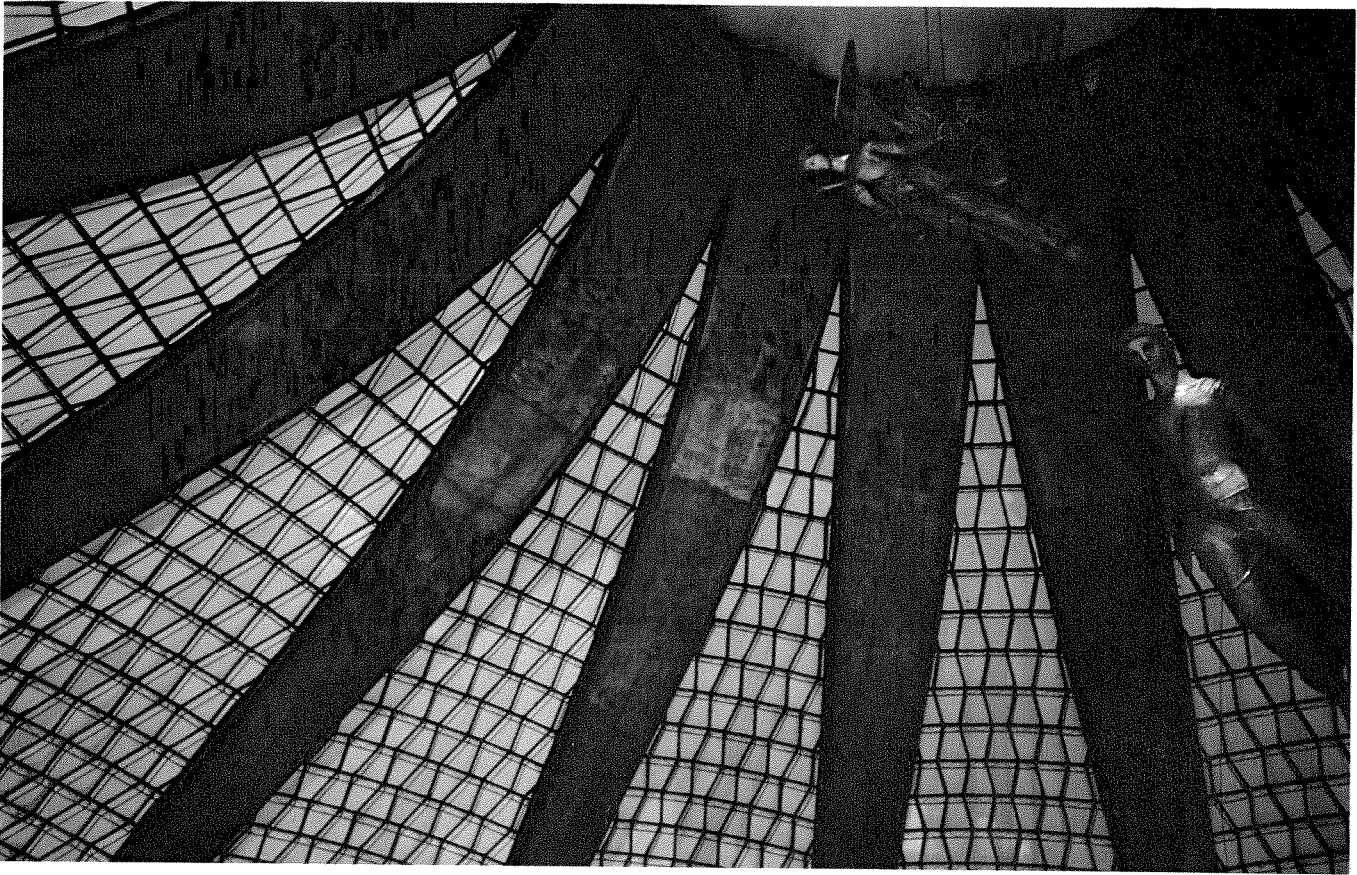
Jack Gantos

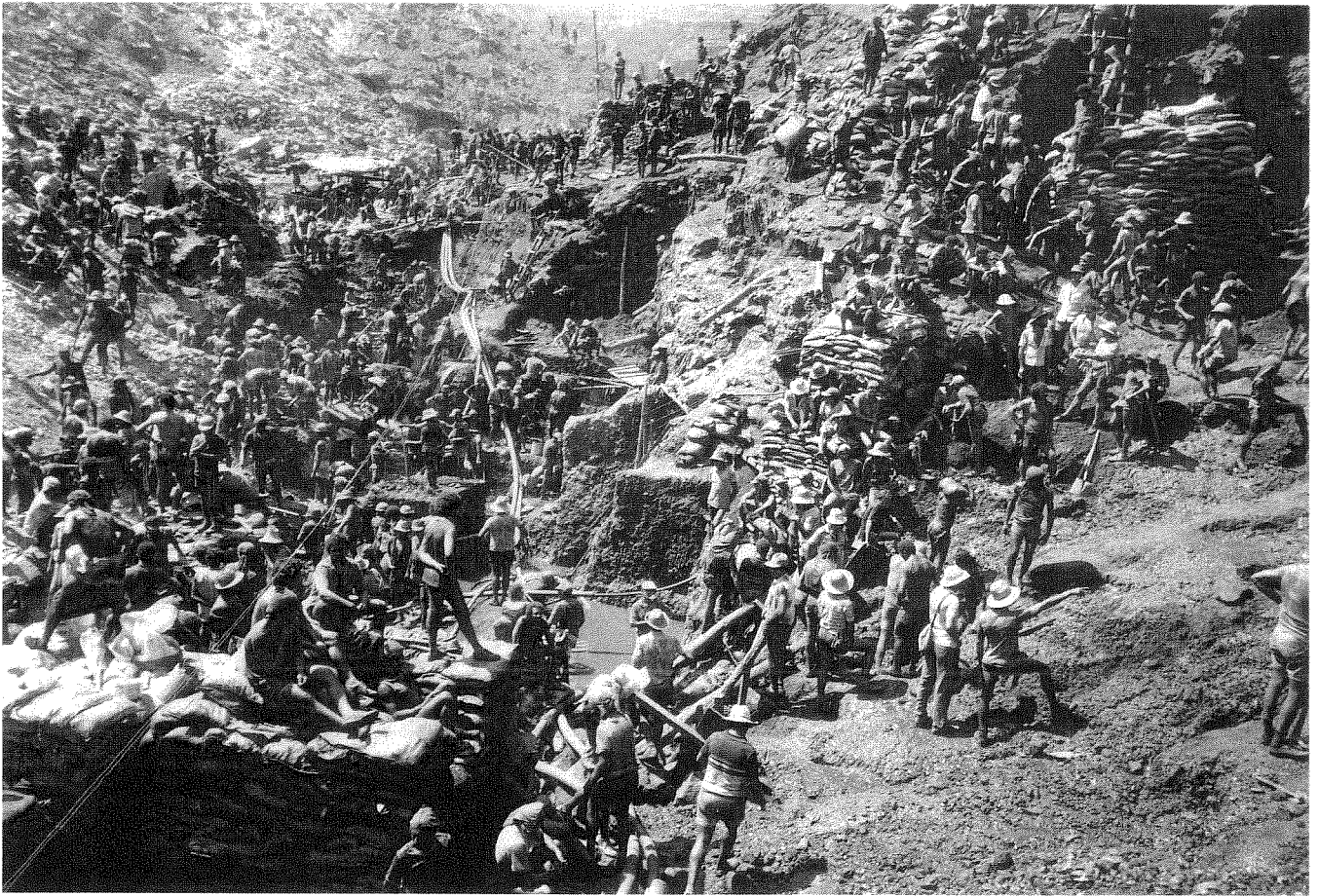
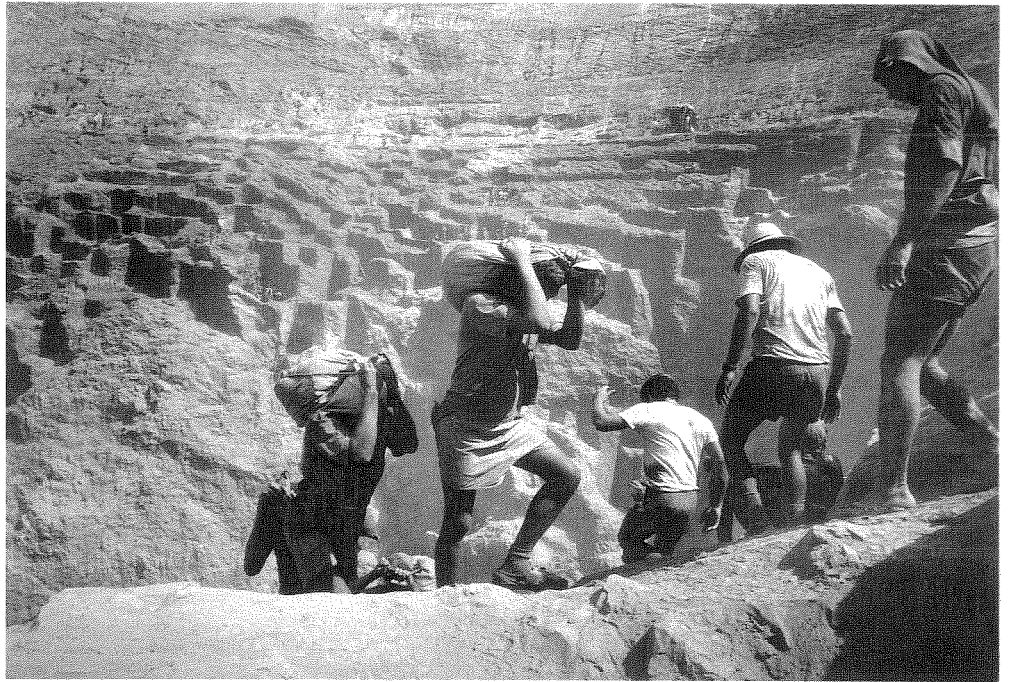


Photos by Peter Droege and Jack Gantos

The conquistadors believed there was a gilded king who went about dressed only in an ointment of gold dust. They believed he bathed in a lake now filled with the gold sediment that washed off the king. They believed he was solid gold and carried about in a hammock. They believed he lived in a city of gold and strolled in a garden of golden trees stocked with golden animals. Gonzalo Pizarro couldn't find this mythic city. Friar Gaspar de Carvajal couldn't find it. Lope de Aguirre couldn't find it. They either went mad, starved and ate their horses and saddles, or were killed by Indians, poisons and insects, disease or each other. Spanish, Portuguese, and Germans alike went crashing through the jungle berserk with the desire for gold.

The Brazilians couldn't find El Dorado and so they manufactured the myth. They built El Dorado and called it Brasilia: an artificial utopia of socialist architecture and bureaucratic organization, a gateway to the untapped natural resources of the jungle, an ideal surrounded by plains of *favelas* and infertile earth. Constructing the city cost more than the country's annual budget. The treasury printed excess money but there was no gold to support the paper. Bankruptcy greeted the project's completion. In the end, Brazil's president, Juscelino Kubitschek, was presented with the golden





key to the city. And the capital city is now the jungle port of foreign banking once again investing in explorations for minerals, iron ore, bauxite, manganese, and oil. This is the El Dorado whose purpose is to make concrete its myth.

Serra Pelada did not need such a mythic prehistory. It is not a site first created by myth but the opposite. Myths have been created since gold was first found in its soil. In 1980 a tree fell over during a thunderstorm. In the uprooted soil were found nuggets of gold the size of a man's fist. Twenty thousand men rushed to the site. In the first 10 months over 10 metric tons of gold were removed. Plots of earth, four meters square, were distributed by government agents. The first men built shelters of tree limbs and black plastic. Now a wooden town has grown around its rim. Each morning men descend the ladders and footpaths to the claims. The ore is dug out simply, by hand, and the 40-kilo sacks of earth are carried up and out on the backs of men who have seen the gold with their own eyes. The terraced plots have been worked to uneven depths from varied success and this great unplanned crater is the labor of a city inverted. Now the amphitheater is one mile square. It is said that everyone is a king at Serra Pelada. "Babylonia," the miners call that hole, that kin to El Dorado.

