

Urban Fissures

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Urban fissures

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Brasília is known as a 'modern city'. Moreover, it ranks among extreme examples of top-down designed settlements. However, the city underwent transformations over time, becoming less 'pure'. These have been mainly in modes of appropriation of space rather than changes in its physical structure, but the latter have also happened. The paper addresses the issue of 'spatial subcultures' – *fissures* – that have emerged in the interstices of the dominant order, as well as the reaction of the latter to the appearance of the former. 'Spatial culture' is addressed in the widest sense, concerning both social production and social reproduction. Modernist urban design has been assessed as non-amicable to public appropriation of places. In Brasília this concerns e.g. the vastness of open spaces, particularly in the more symbolic parts of the city, in which culture as social reproduction has been projected on the ground as a reflection of ideological and political values/functions. However, this problem is also a great asset, as the availability of open spaces has been exploited as a resource for implementing unforeseen activities. The *myth* of deserted spaces is contradicted by both formal occasions (political rallies, religious celebrations) and informal ones – swarming of people at leisure in streets closed to traffic at weekends. In closed spaces, this takes the form of land use changes. In both cases, the move is towards more instrumental and more popular appropriation of places, in contrast with the expressive and elitist determinations of the norm. Changes are not devoid of tensions, which reflect contradictory viewpoints over the city – civil society vs. the State, or between diverging social classes' interests.

Keywords: Brasília, architectural syntax/semantics, body syntax/semantics, urban fissure

Introduction

Brasília is well-known as a 'modern city'. Although not completely wrong, this is at least reductionism – it does not capture the most powerful aspects of Lucio Costa's proposal (Costa, 1995). In contrast with all other 24 entries of the national competition in 1956-7, he wrote that 'the city should be conceived not as a simple organism able to satisfactorily fulfil the vital functions of *any modern city* [my italics], not only as *URBS* but also as *CIVITAS* [original italics and capital letters], holding the inherent attributes of a capital' (Costa, 1995 [my translation]). The

monumental space to house the State functions at a Federal level – the *Centre of the State*, as I call it – is by no means a 'modern' gesture: many discourses on modern architecture have stated that it should be related to large masses of people and to go 'monumental' was to go against 'democratic solutions' (Zein, 2001). But *discourses* contradicted *fact*: true, we do not find Brasília's baroque monumentality, but what was Le Corbusier's *Plan Voisin* (Le Corbusier, 2009)? What was his proposal for the *Unités d'habitation*, if not isolated buildings in

the middle of nowhere, mimicked exactly in other entries for Brasília (Tavares, 2004)?

I refer to Lucio Costa's original project as the *Pilot Plan* – it was thus called in the competition. It is now the core of a metropolis of c. 2,600,000 people, which surrounds it (IBGE, 2010). I suggest that Costa's *civitas* and *urbs* refer back to the classic Marxist dichotomy *superstructure* vs. *infrastructure* of society, that is, *politics/ideology* vs. *economy* or, as Bill Hillier (1996) puts it, *social reproduction* vs. *social production*. Along history, human settlements may 1) mingle the two dimensions in undifferentiated blocks or around the same public open spaces (as in Siena, Italy, with the governmental *Pallazo Publico* defining the *Piazza del Campo* together with other secular buildings); 2) specialise part of the territory for superstructure in dichotomic fashion (as in the *Mall* vs. 'the rest', in Washington, USA, or the walled Forbidden City, in Beijing); or 3) isolate clearly, in space, *the building* or the set of buildings serving exclusively ceremonial or political purposes, as a feudal castle in France or a Mayan ceremonial centre in pre-Columbian America, the rest locating beyond tracts of empty land (Holanda, 2011).

Costa has chosen the second strategy. The city is a bipartite structure constituted by two rather linear morphological units – urban strips along the

Monumental Axis and the *Road Axis*. Superstructure (or *civitas*) is unambiguously deployed in the Monumental Axis, which, Costa suggests (1995), expresses the distinct role of the city as a national Capital; its main stretch, measuring 3.6km in length, extends from the TV Tower, to the west, to the Square of the Three Powers, to the east.

Infrastructure (or *urbs*) is constituted by the 'wings': the row of blocks (among them the residential 'superblocks') along the Road Axis, a curved thoroughfare that runs north-south. Here daily life takes place through housing and the production, distribution, circulation and consumption of goods and services. The two urban stripes cross at the city centre where the bus station is located and around which the sectors constituting the Central Business District of the Capital are distributed: banks, offices, shops, hotels etc. From the bus station upper deck, looking east, we see the most famous city postcard [Figure 1].

Civitas and *urbs* were clearly legible on the ground in the project and in the first years of the city. They are powerfully designed and still evident in the urban-scape, but the original clear-cut dichotomy has somehow been blurred over time: petty trade and services began to insert itself in the interstices of the monumental space, as well

Figure 1.
Monumental Axis seen from the upper deck of the bus station.



as cultural activities began to take place more intensely in residential areas. Both movements are bottom-up processes: the action of thousands and, in mega cities, millions of anonymous subjects who act in contradiction with the legal documents that preside over the city's organisation (as discussed, e.g. in Tonkiss, 2013). In Brasília, this has clashed with the top-down conceptualisation of the city in minute detail by its architect.

But there is another aspect to it. Over and above these macro dimensions of social production and reproduction, there has been a continuous tension concerning the deployment of social classes in space. The original residential areas have proved to be predominantly suitable for middle and upper classes; the working class has been forced to move to the distant periphery, pushed away either by official housing policies or by the market; informal trade that developed in the upper deck of the bus station has been removed to a site 6km away from the city centre (Holanda, 2015).

However, low-income *fissures* still show in this social landscape mainly characterised by 'symbolic classes', both as appropriation of public spaces by petty trade and as land use changes in buildings that were previously used as single family housing units for high or middle income layers. We thus have

clashes among different sorts of spatial cultures (in the plural) in Brasília. The outcomes do not always point to a better city for most people. But some indeed do.

Altogether, even a cursory look at how people use space in Brasília will reveal how spatial culture as a whole includes presence in public places. Surely, this is not the same as in Rio or London: a way to express Brasília's peculiarity is that people rather concentrate in space and time. This happens on weekdays, along sidewalks in shopping areas [Figure 2 and Figure 3]; in urban parks and other places, in weekends [Figure 4]; in exceptional circumstances, as in political rallies [Figure 5]. Such evidence demolishes recurring *myths* in the literature, both Brazilian and international, as in Holston (1989, p.163): "What is missing is the outdoor public life of the city, a public sphere of encounters based on *movimento* [in Portuguese in the original], conversation, play, ceremony, ritual, pageantry, as well as political congregation". Figure 2 to Figure 5 contradicts this in all instances.

In the examples to follow, I will consider the city's physical fabric and the modes of its appropriation by people over time. But first let us see how I consider both instances – of the 'city fabric' and of people.



Figure 2.
Weekday use of sidewalks (local shopping area).

Figure 3.
Weekday use in the
South Commercial Sector
(urban centre).



Figure 4.
Road Axis closed to
traffic on Sundays and
holidays.



Figure 5.
Thousands of people
have been rallying at the
Esplanade of Ministries
in the last months due
to the political crisis in
Brazil and other issues.
This photograph dates
from May 29, 2016.



Architectural syntax and body syntax

Space Syntax Theory (henceforth SST) (Hillier and Hanson, 1984) fundamental axiom is: *(social) space is a function of forms of social solidarity*. In this, the two instances of the theory are made explicit: the aim is to study relations between architectural space and people's modes of behaviour, and, in doing so, a paradigmatic change has been operated in architectural theory by which both architecture and society are considered *spatial phenomena* (Hillier and Leman, 1973).

However, to my knowledge, the two expressions in the title of this section are not found in the literature. In this article, 'architecture' is constituted both by *space* (its *ends*) and *built form* (its *means*, by which space is defined). The latter, constituted by built typology (height, density, form, size, building techniques, materials), has implications concerning the discussion to be carried out. Therefore, not only spatial patterns will be referred to, but also the built patterns (*volumetric* patterns) that constitute the spatial cultures dealt with herein.

I have been trying to bring together both instances of the architectural phenomenon into play, applying this to the analysis of particular settings (Holanda, 2007). Others have been theoretically more ambitious, like Oliveira (2013) while studying the evolution of urban forms in Lisbon and Porto (Portugal). He has brought together various schools of thought, including SST: the "English historical-geographical approach", the "Italian typological school", the "French study of urban form" etc. Besides considering spatial attributes of public places, as in the *hard* tradition of space syntax – which is fundamentally *topological*¹ – he has dealt with plots', buildings' and blocks' forms and dimensions, attributes of a rather *geometrical* kind. However, such authoritative accomplishment, which had its sequel in Oliveira et al. (2015), has resulted in a vast empirical documentation but awaits a deeper interpretive work, particularly in what concerns rela-

tions architecture vs. social structuring. This article pursues such a possibility.

Other efforts have also been made to expand the scope of, say, orthodox syntactic studies. Colleagues from Sweden have been exploring the possibilities of *place syntax*, which adds to the axial analysis of the street grid – which depicts the more and the less accessible streets to the set of streets as a whole – plot attributes as *density* and *diversity* (Stähle, Marcus & Karlström, 2005). This includes other place attributes missing in space syntax analysis, which add new elements in explaining pedestrian flows, for example. However, my analysis demands the addition of further attributes of *built form*, because they impinge upon real estate value and, as a proxy, social stratification – e.g. whether the edifice is a single-family house or a block of flats, whether it is over *pilotis* or otherwise etc. I will include such differentiation, albeit in a qualitative way (I will not put forward here techniques for quantifying the evidence, which has been done preliminarily, along these lines, by Ocaranza [2015]).

Therefore, the reasoning in this paper refers to *architectural syntax* – space syntax becoming a component of the analysis to be carried out, because: 1) 'architecture' here includes means (volumes) and ends (spaces) (Coutinho, 1970)²; 2) I am analysing volume *syntax* as well, for I am considering patterns which constitute volumes, and these in turn imply relations among component parts: the understanding of *space* or *volume* is the understanding of relational patterns among elements that constitute them. But I also avoid *place syntax*, as it is already in the literature akin to space syntax: we are here dealing with the idea of place which is of interest for the discipline of *architecture*, not the discipline of, say, geology or economy. I am inspired by Augé (1995), although stretching a bit his argument: architecture is *place*, yes, but there is here a specific connotation to it: by means of its *syntax* (and its *semantics* – see below) it encap-

¹ Even when it includes "topo-geometrical" measures, the idea is still fundamental topological: geometry is used to limit (geometrically) what will be measured (topologically); at most, a (geometrical) weight is superimposed on (topological) measures.

² Evaldo Coutinho was a greatly respected scholar. He is considered one of the most prominent Brazilian philosophers of the 20th Century and his oeuvre ranges from "purely" philosophical writings to books specifically on architecture (*O espaço da arquitetura*) and cinema (*A linguagem autônoma*). I was fortunate enough to have him as my teacher at college. It is amazing how he anticipates many tenets of Space Syntax Theory, to appear c. ten years later.

³ This discussion of the definition of architecture is developed in my *10 Commandments of Architecture*. Some headlines of it are found in https://www.academia.edu/8562649/10_COMMANDMENTS_OF_ARCHITECTURE_2013_Presentation_Preface_Ruth_Verde_Zein_Contents_and_enunciations

⁴ Literature oscillates along *space*, *place* and *architecture* almost as if these terms were interchangeable (even though this may be unwillingly), without dwelling upon theoretically needed differences among them. For example, consider how they appear in Koch (2016): *space* = 23 times, *place* = 13 times and *architecture* (alas!) = 5 times; or in Netto (2008): *space* = 109 times, *place* = 22 times and *architecture* (alas!) = 1 time.

⁵ Read in the Brazilian edition: Le Corbusier, 1977.

sulates culture, history, social identity, while they are produced, appropriated or given meaning by humans (Holanda, 2015)³. So, *architectural syntax* aims at revealing properties that make places work as such – i.e. as architecture⁴. My effort is to bring *architecture* to frontstage, both ends and means, space and volumes, voids and masses – their component elements, their relations, i.e. their *pattern*.

On the other hand, for SST, society is considered as a system of static or moving *bodies in space and time* – a system of *encounters* and *avoidances* that also constitute legible physical patterns in the landscape, and that are routinely being reconfigured, along the hours of the day, days of the week, seasons of the year – and in special fashion depending on special circumstances. We can thus speak of a *body syntax*, which depicts relations among bodies in space and time, the groups of which may be large or small, concentrated or dispersed, assembling in daily life or in special moments (or a combination of both, which is more usual), moving through small or large distances etc., that form, again, intelligible patterns.

As far as their *syntax* is concerned, they are bodies on the surface of the Earth the only attributes of which would be those of tiny dots observable by an anthropologist in Mars, when looking at mankind through a powerful telescope (the metaphor was used, to my memory, by Bill Hillier in a seminar back in the 1970s). Humankind is many things, but it is also an *artefact* constituted by bodies deployed in space and time (Hillier and Netto, 2002).

Recently, Netto (2017) has attempted to depict the structure of such an artefact in a large urban scale, focusing on spatial stratification in the cities of Rio and Niterói (Brazil): data from thousands of moving subjects have been plotted in space through time (hours of the day, days of the week), revealing patterns of superimposition – or segregation in networks of movement – of different social classes in places. Here, I hope to throw some light on the

issue, but focussing on the much smaller scale of delimited places, but, at the same time, in longer timespans – sometimes over years.

Architectural semantics and body semantics

Understanding architecture and its implications to people does not mean only understanding actual configuration of its spaces and built forms. Moving away from modernistic determinism, by which from a new architecture would magically spring up a new society (e.g. Le Corbusier's *Towards an architecture* [2007])⁵, we are today more modest and hopefully wiser. Architecture does not determine behaviour, but it creates both a field of possibilities and a field of restrictions: possibilities can be explored according to the will of the subjects to enjoy them; restrictions can be overcome according to the capacity of the subjects to master them. But possibilities and restrictions are there, independent of the subjects and of time, for they are *intrinsic* to configurations and last as long as configuration itself lasts. Allow me a neologism: syntactically, we can say that architecture is *monosemous*: it has the same 'meaning', in the sense of concrete, real implications regardless of the subject.

Something other is 'semantics' – and perhaps inverted commas should apply here, for the word is loaded with many meanings and the connotation here is specific. More than meets the eye is superimposed on the material configuration of architecture – functional labels, social memory, historical values, symbolic importance. We 'know' syntactic implications by simply coming into touch with architecture – its implications are immediately, practically and intuitively apprehended. But we do not 'know' architectural semantics unless we are aware of the particular codes of the culture. There are rules that inform the appropriation of places that are not engraved on its materiality. We can unadvisedly knock at the wrong door (Pearson and Richards, 1997). Semantically, architecture is *poly-*

semous – this “elusive” dimension of architecture (Netto, 2017) may change in time and, moreover, at a particular point in time may change from subject to subject, according to one’s particular life history⁶.

The notion of ‘architectural semantics’ is not absent from SST. However, Hillier and Hanson (1984) have striven to retrieve ‘semantics’ from physical configuration itself, using the notion of *non-interchangeability*: e.g. the two moieties in a Bororo Village are physically symmetrical, but are semantically a-symmetrical, for clans must position themselves precisely in each of the moieties etc. Such configuration might be described through ‘longer models’, i.e. models that would reveal a greater number of ‘restrictions in a random process’ beyond physicality. More recently, Hillier (2011) has argued the “symbolism” intrinsic in temple façades conveyed by their configuration, approaching the theme rather in the field of Aesthetics than in the field of ‘the social’. But I insist that my interest is in what *does not meet the eye*.

On the one hand, Koch (2016) has stressed the need to explore the other ‘side of the coin’ in ‘body syntax’ studies (my terms): *avoidances*, besides *encounters*. He comments on avoidance achievable through architectural syntax (the obvious strategy of physical separation among spatial domains), but he contributes through reasoning on the *performative action* of subjects over and above architectural syntax; he argues that the ‘filters’ of *memory*, *mythology* and *metonymy* (and we might add *symbolism*) bear upon avoidance in important ways. I take the Café de Flore (Paris) as example. There is nothing especially *physical* about it, but the place swarmed with French intellectuals back in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s – Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus, Foucault... The locale triggers a bunch of memories and meanings, belonging to those who set in a table close Barthes and managed to report them somehow, and to those who went there much after that (as myself, who had a coffee at the place, of course). The Café de Flore is

a *metonym*: “are you going to Sartre this evening?” And, also, it became a *symbol* for French Existentialism – if you were a ‘bloody Stalinist’, better *avoid* going there... But in what peculiar morphological trait is this imprinted? None.

Strolling along similar paths, Netto (2017) deals with cities as ‘systems of communication’. Places are enacted, therefore ‘semanticised’ by our acts – some places more intensely than others, as a temple immersed in residential surroundings – for they connect us with a social information that practical processes give birth to in time (sometimes a very long time indeed). These ‘invisible relations of meaning’ – and we might add, conventional, circumstantial, historical – are triggered by our own meanings in connection with the meanings of others, in a process of exchange that the architecture of places provides.

And yet, Koch and Netto have used indirect evidence to illustrate an argument which is essentially theoretical. Their objective was *not* to offer a range of analytical categories to take to field work. In the case studies that follow, I am partially inspired by their ideas, by bringing *together* the tangible and the intangible in the architecture of the places I examine.

The same applies to body ‘semantics’. To understand social modes of appropriation of places we must know more about bodies than what was depicted by our anthropologist on Mars: social class, occupation, income layer, civil status, none of these meet the eye. Modes of life change dramatically along these attributes, and modes constitute differentially the use of space, *regardless* of variations in configuration, or in its total absence: as we witness in many ‘historical’⁷ Brazilian cities, in unchanged sites the use has changed substantially in the last years (upper classes who buy ancient houses to use them as second residence, tourism etc.). Facing society as *artefact* – visible bodies in space and time – does not suffice: we must inquire into invisible attributes of the subjects, and this

⁶ There is a caveat to it: the aesthetic category of the *sublime*. Alain de Botton (2002): “Sublime places repeat in grand terms the lesson that ordinary life typically teaches viciously: that the universe is mightier than we are, that we are frail and temporary and have no alternative to accept limitations of our will; that we must bow to necessities greater than ourselves.” Perhaps this is a “semantic universal”: humans are not content with admiring *natural* sublime places – e.g. the Grand Canyon: they *build* them. Perhaps this explains the fascination of one Teotihuacan today, almost two millennia after it was built. I have registered my last visit to the place (December, 2016) in video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oboU2MVBj8Q>

⁷ All cities are “historical”, therefore the inverted commas. This is a way to characterize “urban” – that is dense, continuous settlement fabric, with frequent doors opening onto open spaces – as opposed to “formal”, in which discontinuities, blind walls, scarcity of doors etc. abound, as in Brasília (Holanda, 2011).

⁸ This was done in minute detail through *convex analysis* (Holanda (2011)). This is a technique from SST that decomposes the continuous open space structure in units of two dimensions in plan. The Esplanade presents by far the highest average of convex unit sizes analyzed in that work.

⁹ This is similar to Bill Hillier's concept of "symbolic" cities, as expressed in Chapter 6 of *Space is the machine* (Hillier, 1996), but does not coincide entirely with it (for a discussion at length see Holanda, 2011).

¹⁰ The axial map and the integration measure are thy keystones of space syntax analysis. The axial map, as Figure 6 illustrates, abstracts the street grid of the place. After processed (e.g. in *Depthmap*), the output reveals the most accessible lines to the set as a whole (warmer colours, tending to red) and the least ones (colder colours, tending to deep blue).

brings our task closer to traditional phenomenological methodology.

Architectural syntax and semantics, and body syntax and semantics constitute, in this paper, *spatial cultures*. Examples follow in the case of the Brazilian national capital – Brasília.

Secular cleavages in the formal space

Architectural syntax and semantics

The Esplanade of Ministries [Figure 1 and number '1' in Figure 6] houses the distinctive functions of the city: the Centre of the State at a Federal level. Volumes and spaces mark its character. As to volumes: the twin National Congress towers are the highest in the city (98m) [Figure 7], having become the most praised *symbol* of the Capital; the elaborate architectural form of the main governmental palaces, plus the Cathedral and the National Theatre exemplify the classic architecture of Oscar Niemeyer at its peak, of which set perhaps the Ministry of Foreign

Relations (Itamaraty Palace) [Figure 8] is the masterpiece (Holanda, 2011b). As to the sheer size of open spaces⁸, the attributes are *not* appropriate for daily life: large mean size of open space units; high percentage of blind spaces (i.e. tracts of open spaces with no doors opening onto them), caused by many blind façades; low level of constitutiveness (degree to which the space is "fed" by doors [Hillier & Hanson, 1984]) concerning both the perimeter of the buildings and the amount of open public spaces per door etc. All morphological attributes, together with the functions exerted herein, constitute the paradigm of *formality*, in its particular case of an *exceptional space*, characterising a place specialised for the superstructural dimensions of social order (Holanda, 2011a)⁹. As to axial spatial analysis, the axial map of the Capital's core (the Pilot Plan) depicts the importance of the Esplanade: it is in the integration core [Figure 6] (Holanda, 2011a)¹⁰.



Figure 6. Case-studies indicated in the Pilot Plan and immediate surroundings' axial map: (1) Esplanade of Ministries; (2) Village Planalto; (3) TV Tower; (4) W-3 Avenue.



Figure 7.
National Congress.



Figure 8.
Ministry of Foreign Relations (Itamaraty Palace).

However, on the fringes of the place kiosks for petty trade and services have appeared over time through bottom-up action of subjects [Figure 9, Figure 10]. (Actually, Costa has somehow anticipated these in his first sketches for Brasília, but it was ignored in the implementation of the city and in the ensuing debates [Costa, 1995].) Overall, due to the sheer dimensions of the place and because they are peripheral to the main large open convex unit – the central lawn – they do not have a strong impact on perception. And yet, they change the scene for those using the place in daily life. They introduce a different scale that dialogues with the

monumental one; they establish somehow a more continuous façade along the ministerial buildings, opening on to the central lawn; they insert constitutiveness in an otherwise blind space. Until recently all this was illegal but a recent norm issued by the IPHAN – *Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional* [National History and Heritage Institute] (IPHAN, 2016), which is causing fierce discussions in media, introduces a permission for small buildings to be constructed in between the main edifices. If materialised, this will be an important architectural move.

Figure 9. Pedestrians at mid-day in the Esplanade of Ministries (Source: Gabriela Tenorio).



Figure 10. Petty trade and services in the Esplanade of Ministries (Source: Gabriela Tenorio).



¹¹ 'Gate' is a point of counting pedestrians passing through. An adaptation had to be made here, as compared to traditional procedures. In configurations in which spatial borders are clearly defined it is easy to draw an imaginary line the crossing of which is noted down. Here in the Esplanade, there must be an approximation to that: people were counted only in so far as they were strolling along the sidewalks, and going through an imaginary line perpendicular to them. As the sidewalks concentrate almost all the people present here, this is an acceptable approximation.

The bottom-up action of subjects has introduced a dimension of infrastructure in an otherwise specialised place for superstructure – both politics and ideology. Albeit modestly, this helps to blur the clear-cut original dichotomy *civitas* vs. *urbs* of the Capital, by inserting new labels (land uses) as snack houses, small restaurants, bookshops, stationers, magazine stands, drugstores and other types of petty trade and services.

Once materialized, they would contribute to the Esplanade being, in daily life, not only a *symbolic* space to be seen from outside but also an *instrumental* space to be experienced from inside (I use on purpose Hillier's dichotomy as put forward in *Space is the Machine*, Chapter 6 [1996]).

Body syntax and semantics

In weekdays, moving and static people mainly locate on the fringes of the place and are not evenly distributed along time. Their presence is intensified during arrival and departure to and from work (early morning and late afternoon), and at lunchtime (which represents peak numbers). Counting was made in six points; at lunchtime, during the busiest hour (1PM-2PM) numbers vary from 156 to 894 people, depending on the gate¹¹ selected. The most central points, along the east-west orientation, present the highest numbers [Figure 11] (Tenorio and Holanda, 2010).

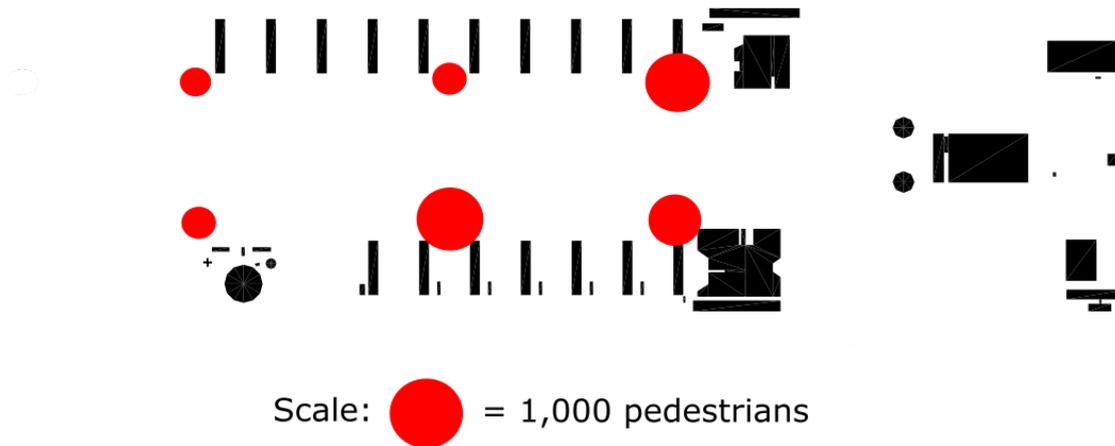


Figure 11. Pedestrian counting in the Esplanade of Ministries, 1-2pm on a normal weekday (red circles represent the 'gates' and the number of people according to the scale indicated; in black, spatial islands)

Although public administration is responsible for the greatest contribution of the city's gross product (*circa* 50%), the population is predominantly employed in personal and business services in general (55%), whereas public administration employs about 20% of the labour force (Ribeiro et al., 2015). However, it is exclusively part of the latter 20% (Holanda, 2011a) that occupies the Esplanade daily – this is the specialised body semantics of the place.

The main central space is not apprehended in an exclusively symbolic/expressive manner, though – i.e. for pure contemplation and aesthetic pleasure. As it is historically the case (Holanda, 2011a), these huge places specialised for politics and ideology – *exceptional spaces* – are occupied in *exceptional* circumstances, be they ceremonial (e.g. religious gatherings as in *Corpus Christi* day, the city's patron saint day, an exceptional mass by the Pope etc.) or political (e.g. political rallies). In Brazilian present circumstances tens of thousands of people, from working to middle classes (certainly not from upper classes...), have recurrently gathered in the Esplanade of Ministries for political reasons and other issues¹².

True enough, the insertion of such events in the city's life is not the same as the tens of thousands of people that gather in an avenue of São Paulo or

Rio. In the latter case, the impact is both spatial *and* transpatial¹³: they aim at people who live in the immediate surroundings *as well as* society as large. Not in Brasília: there is no one around the Esplanade to be summoned to join the crowd in such rallies – no one is there to listen to the outcry 'Come to the street! Come!', which became one of the main symbolic clamours in such occasions. And yet, the imagery of people in such demonstrations, in such a powerful symbolic space, broadcast live through big media and social networks, does make a difference. As William Mitchell argued in *Revenge of the Place* (2001), people are not content to interact through electronic devices, but, with mobile phones in hand, go to real places to meet real people. Also in Brasília, and also in the Esplanade of Ministries' symbolic space *par excellence*.

Today, the space is ordinarily occupied exclusively by civil servants, except for the Cathedral, the Cultural Centre and the National Theatre. The permission to locate petty trade and services here, recently granted by IPHAN (commented above), may change the scene. The place may not only fix workers for a longer time – as in the *happy hour* – but also attract other people to enjoy the beautiful architectural scene and the fascinating light of a late afternoon in Brazil's Central Plateau.

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WA-zwxAlUQ>

¹³ Concepts of *spatiality* and *transpatiality* are at the foundations of SST, and are presented at the very beginning of the book *The Social Logic of Space* (Hillier & Hanson, 1984). *Spatial relations* have to do with spatial proximity whereas *transpatial relations* have to do with relations among social categories, regardless of vicinity.

Village Planalto: the ironic social utopia

Architectural syntax and semantics

The Village Planalto, 1,500m away from the Square of the Three Powers and 3,900m from the CBD, is the remanence of a camp of contractors the origins of which dates from the beginning of the city's construction, in 1957 (Holanda, 2007 and Ocaranza Pacheco, 2015 for further details; number '2' in Figure 6). The 2010 Demographic Census informs

that there were at the time 7,361 inhabitants and 1,424 plots of land for all uses (IBGE, 2010). It is a place of great variety of plots, buildings, blocks and public spaces; building heights go up to four stories only, but these are rare – the large majority is one and two storeys high [Figure 12, Figure 13]. Streets and sidewalks also vary in width; some alleys barely allow the passage of vehicles [Figure 14, Figure 15].

Figure 12. (left)
 Village Planalto. Building example (1).



Figure 13. (right)
 Village Planalto. Building example (2).



Figure 14. (left)
 Village Planalto. Street example (1).



Figure 15. (right)
 Village Planalto. Street example (2).



Public spaces – streets, alleys and squares – are clearly defined by buildings. Convex spatial units are small and constitutiveness of open spaces, by means of frequent doors along which we pass, is high; we rarely have blind walls defining blind spaces. The Village has a picturesque quality that grants it a peculiar character. Still, it is not well structured axially: the sort of *collage* resulting from bringing together sites incorporated by various and independent contractors in its origins is perceivable in the Village scape; this is noticeable in the axial map Rn^{14} of the site [Figure 16]. Still, vacant land amongst them came to be occupied along time and today the Village presents a continuous and rather dense spatial order. It is clearly legible as a distinctive borough in the surroundings of the Pilot Plan and it could hardly contrast more with it.

The Village has been always a predominantly residential area, including petty trade and service for the local inhabitants. But in recent years there have been governmental incentives for restaurants to locate here, and a ‘gastronomic pole’ has been developed. This was favoured by the proximity with the jobs in the Esplanade of Ministries and the Square of the Three Powers, as well as the absence of good restaurants there – at lunch-time many civil servants come to the Village.

Body syntax and semantics

From its origins, the Village has housed a great variety of people: the contractors organised the space to house all sorts of subjects, from top managers to the working class, and engineers, architects and technicians in between; there have

¹⁴ This is a form of processing the axial map, by which all lines are related to all other lines. The processing can be done otherwise, by defining the *range* of processing – e.g. to analyze the relation of lines to its close proximity (in which case we have R3, R5 processing etc.) (Turner, 2004).



Figure 16.
Village Planalto. Axial map (Rn) (Source: Matias Ocaranza).

been government officials also living there from the beginnings. Of course, this has happened in different plots, houses, streets. In 1987 the Village was included in the perimeter that classified Brasília as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (DISTRITO FEDERAL, 1987). From then on, strong rules have prevented blocks and plots to be transformed, and there was a corresponding variety in market values (e.g. it was not allowed to join plots or sub-divide them). Over time, these houses changed hands, but the social variety was maintained, in accordance with built diversification.

Despite the prime location, it has an income profile similar to the one of the Federal District (which coincides with the municipality of Brasília) as a whole – almost a precise microcosm of the metropolis. In the Village, there are less rich people (Village = 2.5%, FD = 5.1%), more from the middle class (Village = 49.6%, FD = 45.0%), slightly less poor people (Village = 47.9%, FD = 49.9%). This contrasts greatly with income profile in the traditional superblocks of the Pilot Plan, which present an inverted picture (e.g. the rich are *circa* 65% of the people) (IBGE, 2010).

The picturesque character of the village and its privileged location attracted intellectuals, including teachers from the University of Brasília. The best houses allow adjustments to match the expectations of the middle class. There is space within the plot to build garages and the streets allow parking space for visitors. However, they are a minority. Most of the architecture is not pleasant to middle classes, let alone to the rich. More than four decades after the inauguration of the city market forces were not able to evict low-income residents, on the contrary: in contrasting fashion with what happens in the Pilot Plan, which is become increasingly the place for the elite, the Village became *more* popular from 2000 to 2010, as the Census data demonstrate (IBGE, 2002, 2010). Architecture as an independent variable talks louder. Village Planalto is a telling example

of architecture as a “cultural resource” (Peponis, 1989:101) at work: “if society classifies people in different classes, roles and positions, urban space can be one of the means of reintegration” (Peponis, 1989:106).

The Village is the *utopian* counterpoint to the *myth* of social equality expressed by Lucio Costa concerning his superblocks – an ironic social utopia. Lucio Costa has imagined the superblocks to house different social layers (Costa, 1995). He got it wrong: he believed the city might work through his “single recipe”, as he put it: everybody would live in flats, the variation of which would be limited to size, location or finishing materials. This did not – and could not – account for demands of a much wider morphological variety in domestic space from the whole set of social layers.

It is an irony that a place which predominantly houses the poor, located in the heart of the metropolis, one which was doomed to disappear when the city was ‘ready’ – for it was designed as a provisional contractors’ camp – should have become a fascinating example of a democratic space, if by such we understand a spot in the landscape that is the home for an almost perfect match for the social stratification of society at large.

Good monument is... deserted monument

Architectural syntax and semantics

Once upon a time there was a popular craftsmanship fair immediately around the base of the TV Tower, one of the two powerful landmarks, to use Kevin Lynch’s term, which denote the extremes of the main stretch of the Monumental Axis (the other landmark being the twin towers of the National Congress). The fair had existed for 40 years until it was removed to another site in 2010 (near the tower, but with quite different spatial attributes). It was an important element of the immaterial culture of the city. The reasons for removal put forward by the government were that it was not in accordance

with the rules of Brasília as a heritage site (a highly controversial debate has ensued). The fair was constituted by kiosks placed around the base of the tower, geometrically organized in rows leaving narrow alleys among them [Figure 17, number '3' in Figure 6].

The site is a gentle artificial hill upon which stands the TV Tower. From the TV Tower to the bus station we have a west-east vast open space, 1,000m long per 280m wide, along which there are six traffic lanes of the Monumental Axis in each side. From this central gardened strip and by crossing these lanes towards north or south we reach the hotel sectors. Before the fair, which appeared in 1972, the only 'door' opening directly to the place was... the lift door leading the tower mezzanine

(where there is a snack house) and a belvedere 75m above the ground. From the hill and, moreover, from the belvedere we have another privileged viewpoint to the Esplanade (the other one being from the upper deck of the Bus Station) [Figure 18]. Except for a large fountain near the tower, the place is a big garden of lawns and flower beds plus small and sparsely located trees, ill-equipped with facilities for the public to use. When the fair appeared, the kiosks inserted some constitutiveness to the place, but they were too small to make a difference in the perceivable scale of this huge place (therefore the controversial removal). The kiosks' visual impact architecturally speaking was very limited to the immediate surroundings of the tower. The social impact was something else altogether.



Figure 17.
Aerial view of the kiosks of the craftsmanship fair around the base of the TV Tower (Source: Google Earth Pro, 2010).



Figure 18.
View of the Monumental Axis from the TV Tower belvedere

Before the fair, the only reason to go there was the view from the tower towards the Esplanade. A number of tourists and the odd resident came over, and this attracted vendors and their kiosks, which sold craftsmanship items and, in some cases, snacks and traditional meals of Brazilian cuisine. West-east pedestrian pathways somehow connect the tower to the bus station and north-south ones connect the hotel sectors, in both sides of the Monumental Axis, among themselves.

Body syntax and semantics

Over time, the presence of tourists and the odd inhabitant have attracted vendors, who in turn have

attracted more visitors, who attracted more vendors, in a virtuous circle of urbanity.

But even during the existence of the fair the place was very little occupied from Monday to Friday, except for some tourists who were eventually in the city only during such days. On Saturdays and Sundays, though, the place swarmed with people. They formed long strings of pedestrians along the gardens connecting the fair to the bus station [Figure 19] as well as sat on the grass on the gentle slopes of the hill to enjoy the view [Figure 20]. The fair sort of overspilled along the pathways to the east.

Figure 19.
Pedestrians on a weekend along the path linking the TV Tower to the Bus Station.



Figure 20.
People in the fair and sitting in the grass, turning towards the view of the Monumental Axis.



Surprisingly enough, the main declared reason to be here was neither the purchase of craftsmanship items, nor the food, nor the view: was to see other people – social encounters by themselves. The event was first and foremost a social occasion. (This was clear in an inquiry we have carried out at the time, which also showed that the vendors lived *in their totality* in the city's periphery¹⁵.)

The proximity to the bus station (you can easily walk to the tower) brought many people from the satellite towns, for whom 'going to the Plan' by bus at weekends was (and is) a family business. The fair brought together tourists (in significant minority by then), married couples (with or without children), adult singles, youths, adolescents; it also brought together middle classes living in the Plan (as myself, wife and kids – playing with kites was a must) and the working class coming from the satellite nuclei.

The removal of the fair had an enormous (and sad, for that matter) impact on the use of space. The images in [Figure 21], [Figure 22], [Figure 23] and [Figure 24] show the surroundings of the tower before and after the event; for the purposes of comparison, the contrasting photographs were taken on a Saturday, in a normal weekend, at 4pm. The event is one further example of the elitist policies that preside over the use of public open spaces in Brasília. The purported reason for the removal was the 'free view of the monument', supposedly impaired by the fair – which did not actually happen for reasons of scale, as I have argued. In fact, this was an ideological move that ignored (or attacked?) the synergy obtained from the mix of social classes and social activities – a drop of urbanity in an isolated bit of the territory. But urbanity even so.

¹⁵ I have carried out this inquiry with my students in the mid-1970's. Unfortunately, the unpublished research report has been lost. I quote the figures by heart. We intend in the short run to make a similar inquiry at the present situation/location.



Figure 21. (left)
The fair and its surroundings looking west before its removal (the kiosks are seen in the background).



Figure 22. (right)
The fair and its surroundings looking West after its removal.



Figure 23. (left)
The surroundings of the fair looking east before its removal.



Figure 24. (right)
The surroundings of the fair looking east after its removal.

Low-income fissure in a middle-class setting

Architectural syntax and semantics

The W-3 South Avenue is a long thoroughfare running north-south that extends all along the Pilot Plan [Figure 25 and number '4' in Figure 6]. It runs parallel to the Road Axis, to the west. It has a curious configuration: on the east side there are contiguous, up to three stories buildings [Figure 26] and, on the west side, there are single family housing units, the

majority of which are two stories edifices and some reach three [Figure 27]. It is one more example of modern orthodoxy by which the *block* has been the object of attention concerning land use, not the *street*: in the east side of the W-3 there are shops and services on the ground floor and offices in the upper floors; in the west, there is only residential use. Or rather: there was...

Figure 25.
W-3 South Avenue.



Figure 26.
W-3 South Avenue, east side.



Figure 27.
W-3 South Avenue, west side.



When I moved to the Capital in 1972 there was almost nothing at the city core – that is, the Centre of Civil Society, not the Centre of the State: it would take some more years for the Commercial Sectors to be implemented. The stretch of the W-3 along the first superblocs to be built, at approximately the midpoint of the South Wing, was the actual centre of the city. Here were concentrated the main shops, cinemas, theatres, banks, art galleries, services in general – to the east side. It was the busiest spot in the growing Capital.

The W-3 is in the Pilot Plan's integration core – that is, it belongs to the set of most accessible streets – although not in the red colour band but in the yellow one [Figure 6]. But because of its high integration, added to its history and land uses, it has always been the busiest avenue in the Pilot Plan. However, it was not such movement that brought with it the commercial land uses, they were defined beforehand. As anywhere in Brasília, land use here was top-down defined, it had no relations with configuration: the “law of natural movement” (Hillier et al., 1993), by which integrated spots attract people that attract central uses that attract people in a virtuous circle, does not apply here, as seldom applies in this city (there are telling exceptions, e.g. a thoroughfare that runs to the west of the Pilot Plan, but which is not dealt with in this paper).

The space of the avenue between east and west sides is usually well constituted: particularly in the blocks nearer the city centre both shops to the west and houses to the east open directly to the avenue. But further south, farther away from the city centre, houses open to local streets and face the avenue with blind, lateral walls.

Body syntax and semantics

Once a lively avenue [Figure 28], the W-3 is today highly deserted [Figure 29]. At first, it was full of vehicles and people. It brought together middle classes living in the nearby superblocs and people coming

from the satellite nuclei whom also came here for goods, services and jobs. Sidewalks (on the east side, for sure) were packed with pedestrians strolling along shop fronts. It was the spot of urbanity in the Pilot Plan *par excellence*. (See figure 28 and 29).

Then, commercial sectors in the city centre began to be implemented; shopping centres began to appear, in the city centre and in the periphery; generous parking spaces were generously provided everywhere, so that you could take your car practically to the door of your destiny. All this began to change the urban scene in the avenue dramatically. Shops began to close and people disappear. The movement of vehicles is still intense; in fact it has kept increasing over time. But it is a ‘through movement’ (a movement of passing by vehicles), not a ‘to movement’ (as a final destination) (Hillier et al., 1993); the avenue is still a convenient passage to many destinies, including many offices, clinics, schools, universities, cultural institutions of various sorts that were built in parallel blocks to the immediate west of the blocks of houses facing the Avenue. Many bus routes go through the avenue, running only in the Pilot Plan or connecting it to the satellite nuclei.

The development of the city – new buildings in residential superblocs, gated communities in the near or distant periphery, for middle classes or otherwise – created new housing opportunities, with convenient number of parking spaces in this ‘car society’, enlarging the housing market options. These factors, together with aspatial aspects – e.g. the nuisance of increasing traffic noise and pollution – has decreased the market values of the houses facing the avenue.

On the other hand, there was an increasing demand for popular services which did not have the chance to locate in other places in the Pilot Plan; this was particularly the case for lodging, as hotels in the central sectors are very expensive. So, hostels, workers’ unions headquarters, night

Figure 28.

The lively atmosphere of the W-3 Avenue in 1965 (Source: Arquivo Público do Distrito Federal).

**Figure 29.**

The deserted W-3 Avenue today.



courses of various kinds for those working during the day, fortune-tellers etc. have proliferated. Unlike shops, which demand a strong localisation concerning passers-by, these services are rather transpatial: they do not depend on local visibility for their success, they become known through ads in traditional media or social networks, or through previous customers who pass the word. Actually, while the repression against them increased, indications of the services in street façades decreased – they progressively mimic the previous residences which exist no longer... But they are there, and people somehow get to know it; they became a convenient

alternative for lower income layers, living in Brasília or visiting the city.

Inhabitants and visitors in these blocks facing the avenue changed drastically towards a more popular profile. The reaction from middle classes still living in the houses to the west of this first row of buildings was strong. The argument, to begin with, was illegality. True, the original regulations predicted only housing. But that was not the point. An attempt to criminalise the services – they were a ‘cover-up for prostitution and drug-dealing’ – brought to light sheer class prejudice. In turn, associations were formalized, bringing together the social actors

who offer the services. Public hearings were held by the government to discuss the matter, which was intensely publicised. After many comings and goings, a new norm by the National Historical and Artistic Heritage Institute (IPHAN, 2016) has been issued recently, allowing the services to be legalized. Easy to guess the hysteria with which it has been received by the local elite. But the norm is only a *permission* granted by the Institute whose role is to look after the city as a Heritage Site: the last word belongs to the local government, which rules over land use patterns in the city. We are still far from the end of the story.

Conclusion

Now (January 2017) it has been 56 years since Brasília's inauguration, and the main functions of the Federal Government have moved from Rio de Janeiro to the new Capital in Brazil's Central Plateau. Admittedly a 'modern' city in many aspects, Brasília has never coincided with modern orthodoxy. This becomes even truer when we consider the morphological types in the city as a whole – not only in the central area designed by Lucio Costa – as it developed through time: two 'vernacular' small urban nuclei, one dating from the 19th century, the other from the 1930's; slums self-produced by workers from 1957 onwards; rural areas illegally parcelled into urban plots in rather-like orthogonal grids; contractors' camps to house the first immigrants to the place; gated communities that have proliferated in recent years.

However, the most interesting lessons to be retrieved from the city's history are the changes in its syntax and its semantics through time – its *spatial cultures*: to various degrees, the city has been daily reinvented by people. This usually happens in cities where bottom-up processes have a strong say, but it has also happened in this strictly top-down designed Capital. Surely this was less significant in the metropolitan core – the Pilot Plan, forcibly

preserved as a World Cultural Heritage Site – than in the periphery. But even in the centre there have been quite surprising and telling transformations, and that is why I have focused them in this article.

In all cases, changes point to a greater degree of urbanity, in contrast with the highly formal original design – if I may refer again to my *urbanity vs. formality* dichotomy (Holanda, 2011a). Such practices demonstrate that even here, a city of predominantly 'symbolic classes' (civil servants who deal essentially with *representations*), actual space still matters. This is true even for the 'transpatial middle class' that lives in the Pilot Plan – a class whose mode of encounters is predominantly in closed private spaces (Holanda, 2011a)¹⁶ – who swarm along the Road Axis for fun when it is closed to traffic on Sundays and holidays. Yet again, Brasília's history corroborates William Mitchell's argument that transpatial links through all sort of electronic devices do not eliminate a strong wish of people to be in real places, meeting real people (Mitchell, 2001).

These *fissures* are *urban cracks* in a highly *formal* landscape (Holanda, 2011a) – and to some extent they crisscross social classes. People impinge upon a 'futuristic' setting – 'fantasy island' is a common *metaphor* to it – *memories* that are brought either from their daily life in Brasília's periphery or from other cities they have happened to know – or in which many have had the chance to live. The transformations are always bottom-up processes: the agency of thousands of people who produce the city despite of, or blatantly against the norms. They are twofold: either through, say, an architecture of additions – building kiosks or small edifices – or through unpredicted land uses and unforeseen and intense appropriation of public open spaces. And the reactions against them are usually top-down – by the government officials in allegiance with upper-class spokesmen who occupy important posts in civil society organisations.

¹⁶ I have explored these modes of encounter through hundreds of interviews (Holanda, 2011a). After that, I came across Bourdieu's (1984) discussion on the great number of varied types of devices for social distinction, perhaps an inspiration for future work.

Changes have not been devoid of tensions, either between social agents and the government, or among different social classes. Such contradictions are not exclusive of Brasília, but here they reach greater visibility and publicity because of the clear-cut socio-spatial segregation we witness in the Capital. All changes face the hegemonic architectural policies, which stand on three fundamental pillars: ignorance, prejudice and gentrification. Most of such 'urban battles' have been lost: a slum self-built by the works from 1957 onwards – the Village Paranoá – was bulldozed in 1989 (Bill Hillier was fascinated by its configuration in his first visit to Brasília in 1986 and often refers to it in his lectures); the TV Tower fair has been removed. Others are en route: the petty trade in the Esplanade of Ministries and the popular services along the W-3 Avenue, against which middle classes are at war. And there are winners, the Village Planalto being the most striking example.

Local housing policies lack inspiration from Village Planalto. Local government and entrepreneurs still rehearse the old *myth* that 'the market' prefers homogeneous boroughs, be they for the poor or for the rich (such boroughs constitute the dominant policy). As in so many cities that have developed over the years or centuries, in the Village Planalto social panorama may change in the turn of a street corner. It is so in London or in Rio. Perhaps in Brasília of the 22nd century?

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