

BRASILIA: PRESERVATION, AMBIGUITY AND POWER

Frederico de Holanda, Gabriela Tenorio*

Abstract

One of the main issues concerning the preservation of Brasilia as a World Cultural Heritage Site is the absence or, to say the least, the ambiguity of the parameters that preside over the city's monitoring policies. The results are arbitrary and unpredictable decisions related to each and every urbanistic episode. There is a paradox: 1) measures which imply damaging cityscape are approved because they are not perceived as such by the preservation agencies; 2) measures which would benefit the city's configuration and its appropriation by the people are prohibited because they are seen as damaging the site. Therefore: more is approved and more is prohibited than it should, simultaneously. Moreover, in both cases (permissions and restrictions) an elitist ideology is revealed, one which benefits the city's appropriation by the upper income layers. Measures grant more space for the individual car even in the most central areas (e.g. North Commercial Sector); there happens an aggressive repression against informal commerce in public spaces and more popular land uses in buildings, in important avenues. It is the case with: informal traders in the Road Platform; the TV Tower weekly fair; the appearance of cheap hostels in the W-3 South Avenue. Brasilia's preservation policies do not take into account recent trends in similar policies around the globe, which give a place of pride to cultural importance as a central aim concerning heritage preservation. Policies ignore the strengthening of urbanity as a crucial objective related to city's form by means of the valorization of public space; the opinion of the more popular social actors involved is disregarded: they do not succeed in countering official outlooks towards the city and in managing the implementation of alternative solutions which would benefit not only themselves but the city at large.

Keywords: *Brasilia, World Cultural Site, preservation policies, planning power, political ideology, political power*

1. Introduction

One must distinguish between discourses and actual fact in any aspect of reality. This includes urban configuration. Perhaps in Brasilia contradictions between discourse and fact are most acute. Since the city's inception, proposals pointed to one direction and the actual city's construction to another. There are many aspects under which we can analyze the configuration of a city. In this paper a choice is made, one which privileges relations between the city's spatial organization and the deployment of social classes in the ground, both concerning places of living and the daily use of the public realm. Relations social classes x their deployment in space present particularities according to place, but a same basic rule is noticeable everywhere: a constant struggle for widening the social spec-

* Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo, Universidade de Brasilia. fredholanda44@gmail.com, gabrielastenorio@gmail.com. Paper presented at the 6th International Seminar on Urban Conservation, Recife, Brazil, March 2011.

trum in each area and the contrary movements that dominant ideology and power try to impose in them.

A particularity of Brasilia plays a central role here: it is a World Cultural Heritage site. Not surprisingly, the needs for preserving it as such provide a backcloth for the arguments concerning its spatial order – legitimately or otherwise. The site considered as cultural heritage contains the nucleus of the original project proposed by Lucio Costa in 1957, but even some of its original boroughs stay outside the site's limits – e.g. the individual family houses by the lake shore. Moreover, although constituting the largest protected urban site in the UNESCO record, it is a small part of the present metropolis: 116 km² out of the 5,802 km² of the Federal District. Still, it includes the four main types of urban configuration that constitute the metropolitan core. These four spatial types came to be called, perhaps rather inadequately, “scales” of the city. They are urbanistic configurations that have specific attributes concerning their open space structure and their building types, but they do not coincide exactly with certain parts of the city: some attributes can be found in places of diverse nature. And yet, they provide a useful framework for the text to follow.

Brasilia's four scales (henceforth without inverted commas) are: 1) *monumental*; 2) *gregarious*; 3) *residential* and 4) *bucolic*. The monumental scale concerns the most emblematic spaces of the city, those in which the buildings related to its primary function – a national capital – locate: the Plaza of the Three Powers, the Esplanade of Ministries, and its prolongation towards west. The gregarious scale concerns the “center of civil society”, where offices, hospitals, hotels, shopping centers etc. locate. The residential scale concerns Brasilia's main type of residential space: the superblocs. Finally, the bucolic scale concerns the surrounding areas which are more sparsely occupied, in which, e.g. the embassies and the University of Brasilia are situated. (Fig. 1)

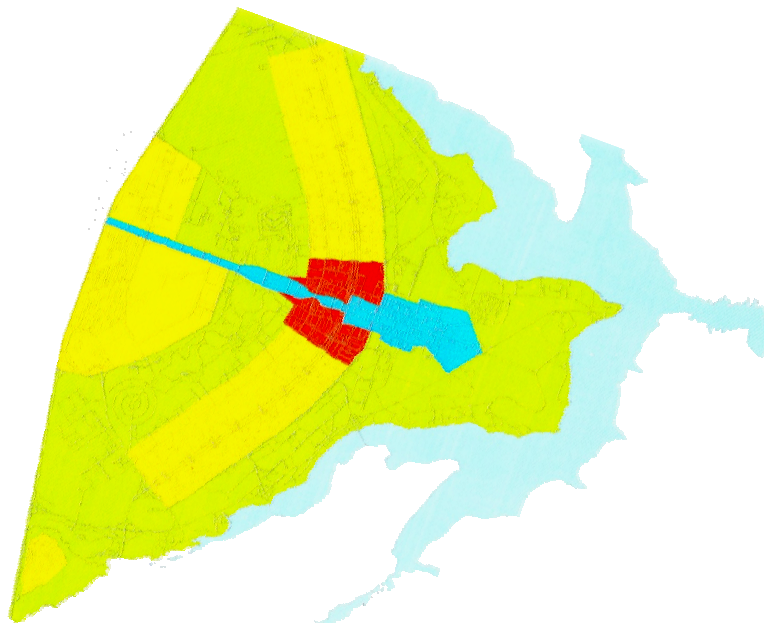


Figure 1. Brasilia's four scales. Monumental (blue); gregarious (red); residential (yellow) and bucolic (green) (Source: adapted from IPHAN, 2007)

Now, we shall not discuss the scales at large: this has been done in various other instances (e.g. Holanda, 2010, Ferreira & Gorovitz, 2009, Leitão, 2009). Rather, the aim will be to characterize politically and ideologically the *tensions* that show in each one of them,

tensions which are related, as suggested above, to the way people of various social layers appropriate the city. Tensions are related to competing ways of categorizing and using the city and, in the last instance, to the quality of its organization to fulfill the fundamental city role, namely the opportunity for seeing and interacting with Other. That is to say: its *urbanity*.

2. On the *monumental scale*

Some aspects of Lucio Costa's blueprint have never been realized – this is the case for every scale, in varying ways. The Esplanade of Ministries and Plaza of the Three Powers are the main elements of this scale – they constitute the tract of the most symbolic places in the city. Here we find the headquarters of the republic's powers: Executive, Legislative and Judiciary. It is thus a place for civil servants, although it includes the Metropolitan Cathedral and two "cultural sectors" in its western end. Still, even here, Costa proposed a richer cityscape than the one we find today: his first sketches indicate a low building that connects the individual ministries among them along the east-west dimension of the Esplanade. The building would provide complementary activities to the state bureaucracy. As it was never done, activities as small restaurants and snack bars, newspapers and magazine stands, places where people fill in forms concerning lottery prizes (very popular in Brazil) etc. began to appear in very similar locations as the ones indicated by Costa in his sketches.

These activities add to the formality of the place a different and interesting atmosphere (Fig. 2). Without them, public space would be deserted, bar the moments in which people arrive at work in the morning or leave it in the afternoon (and also when they leave the buildings – when they do so – to have lunch elsewhere). With them, presence in the public open space is enhanced, particularly with people from lower social strata. People count has been made on both sides of the Esplanade on a sunny workday, from 7am to 5pm: in the busiest track of the place 4,602 people have been noticed, quite a figure. Use of public space is three times more intense when kiosks and street vendors are present. Instead of being inspired by this interesting *indiscipline of the ordinary man* (Certeau, 2000), by which common people contribute to the popular use of the place, the government represses the initiative. Time and again stands are removed by the "forces of the order", only to come back a bit later: in March, 2010, the local newspapers registered 39 vendors, in six different spots (note that the Esplanade is 1 km long). After their subsequent removal, they returned. In September (same year), our inquiry detected 33 vendors in almost the same six spots). The argument is the recurrent one: it contradicts the preservation rules. It is never stated in what terms, or if different solutions would be acceptable, in accordance with those same rules. Costa's original proposal, as usual, is disconsidered.



Figure 2. One of the busiest tracts of the Esplanade on a weekday (Source: the authors)

Brasília's monumental space is what we have called, in another opportunity, an *exceptional space* par excellence: a place specialized for the superstructural political or ideological instance of society (Holanda, 2002). This is no novelty in history, but has the same implications as ever: a place in which only a specialized fraction of society works daily and which, to the common people, functions more *expressively* and to be seen from *outside*, than *instrumentally* and to be lived from *within*. Public policies in Brasília, consciously or otherwise – it does not matter – reproduce the strategy. The result is the weakening of the role that monumental spaces in Brasília play in the minds and in the practical life of people. Despite this, the Esplanade is the first and foremost symbol of the Capital (and it is often referred to as one of the most powerful Brazilian symbols). If the space were incorporated into the life of people by improving its instrumental role, its symbolic importance would improve, not otherwise.

2. On the gregarious scale

The crossing of the city's two main axis is the material basis of its gregarious scale. This is where the bus station and a group of monofunctional nonresidential sectors are located ("north" and "south" commercial, hotels, amusement etc. sectors), surrounding a large "platform" that connects them – a fascinating building complex designed by Lucio Costa himself (Fig. 3). The "Amusement Sector" is depicted by Lucio Costa as a mix of Piccadilly Circus, Times Square and Champs Élysées. With these references of urbanity, it would appear that, by design, the urban core would support a thriving public life. This is not the case. The sectors function as islands, and access routes among them are often difficult, unpleasant and unsafe. They are places that lack shadow and inviting public plazas; open spaces are car dominated and poorly lit.



Figure 3. The platform before the street vendors removal (2007) (Source: the authors)

Nevertheless, hundreds of thousands of people come every day from all over the metropolitan area to work in the city center – where 40% of all jobs are situated (or 82% of the formal ones). In a sunny workday, from 7am to 7pm in the most bustling section of the platform, over 60,000 passersby were counted. The emergence of informal trade along the paths came as no surprise.

Informal trade contributes to shorten distances and enhance urban life to the city center by adding new uses to public spaces and making people linger a little bit more in them. But, again, they are not seen as a contribution to the city, but as a menace – instead of using this social practice as a design input to improve poor public spaces and increase diversity in the gregarious scale, governmental power uses its force to eradicate it.

In May 2008 street vendors were given free stalls in a “popular shopping” located in a place where no one passes by. The governor himself declared that the idea was to keep the center *clean*, from that moment on. We now see the result of this action: stalls that remained most of the time closed due to the obvious absence of clients were little by little being illegally sold to entrepreneurs. A local newspaper tells the story of a firm from another Brazilian state buying twenty stalls for USD 150,000 to establish a lingerie store. Meanwhile, vendors are returning to the streets, despite the strong repression they suffer.

In general, there is little concern about the quality of public spaces in the city or whether they have appropriate design to attract and shelter urban life, but in the gregarious scale this attitude is most acute. There are two “plazas” on the Road Pplatform which are poorly designed, one of them located between a very successful shopping mall placed at street level and the National Theater. It has 6,200 m² and the behavioral mapping has shown that the average occupancy, during a sunny workday, from 10 am to 6

pm, is no more than fifty people, out of which 67% are men (studies show that a great percentage of women in a public place is a good indicator of its success [Whyte, 1980]). Meanwhile, on the sidewalk along the shopping mall's façade one can easily count more than 1,400 pedestrians hourly, on the same period and kind of day. The fact that this "plaza" is so unsuccessful does not seem to bother anyone, and changes in its structure are, in what concerns the preservation instances, forbidden.

On the other hand, debates on the lack of parking lots in the gregarious scale are frequent, and the car-oriented urban design prevails, e.g., in the North Commercial Sector. It is filled with isolated buildings with blind façades, lots of barriers, discontinuities, surrounded by parking places. In other words, a "landscape of objects" instead of a "landscape of places" (Holanda, 1984) with inexistent public realm – naturally, street vendors cannot be found there. On the other hand, in its older symmetric brother – the South commercial sector – spaces are dimensioned to human scale, there are continuous paths for pedestrians, places in which people easily gather, shops on street level, gentle slopes etc. In other words, a "landscape of places", where public life can happen.

Absurd as all such urbanistic events and developments may be, they boil down to one and the same recurrent phenomenon in Brasília, particularly in its most central bits: preventing the appropriation of public space by more popular social layers. To "clean" and "organize" the centre means to devoid them of people in informal activities, people who do not have jobs in the formal sectors of the economy, and returning the "reconquered" spaces either for an exclusively expressive function or for the car, in terms of more parking spaces.

3. On the *residential scale*

Perhaps the most blatant contradictions between discourses about the Capital and its plain reality concern the residential scale. Lucio Costa has proposed only two types of residential space: buildings six stories high in the superblocks and single family houses by the lake shore. He imagined that the houses and a variety of apartment plans would respond to the varied income layers of Brazilian society at that time. This proved far from the truth. Our research has revealed that there is a close relationship between building types and income layers, but that the variation obtaining here is much wider than the one envisaged by Costa: it ranges from individual houses by the lake shore, through flats in six stories high buildings over pilotis, to flats in three stories high buildings (some without pilotis) and a highly varied configuration of urban blocks, streets, form and size of plots, in which various building processes take place, including self-construction of the home or self management of the building process.

The close relations between such varied solutions and the deployment of social layers in space is detectable in Brasília. But one has to pay attention to something more than what is revealed by the average cityscape. In average, it is true that the closer we are to the city center, the richer people are. However, there are many instances of non-conforming phenomena: for various reasons, here and there we find enclaves that include poor families in otherwise rich parts of the city, e.g. in three stories apartment buildings without pilotis, located in the middle of the South Residential Wing of the Pilot Plan – a very affluent place indeed. Among all, the Vila Planalto is the most telling example.

Vila Planalto is only 1,500m away from the Plaza of the Three Powers. It dates from the beginnings of the construction of the city. It had its origins in a building firm camp that provided housing for the company employees of all layers – architects, engineers, technicians, manual workers. It was quite varied concerning plots, houses, blocks, streets,

alleys, sidewalks etc., according to the respective social categories therein. Today (2010), fifty years after the inauguration of the city, such variation is still clearly printed in its configuration. The average plot size is very small (143m²) and 46% of all plots have less than 100m² of area. Some streets are so narrow that they almost forbid cars from passing through. And yet the Vila presents an income stratification that is very close to the stratification of the Federal District as a whole – it is almost, as it were, a microcosm of the entire metropolis: there is a bit more rich people in the FD (10.4% in the Vila, 11.9% in the FD), medium strata are also larger in the FD (49.8% in the Vila, 57% in the FD), and there are circa 7% more poor families in the Vila than in the FD (39.7% in the Vila, 32.5% in the FD). There has been some gentrification. The picturesque character of the Vila, as well as its privileged location, has attracted middle class intellectuals, some of them teachers at the University of Brasilia. The best houses are suitable to adaptations that correspond to middle class expectations and are situated in streets which allow generous parking space. But such houses are a minority. The larger part of the Vila's architecture and townscape is not fashionable to medium strata, let alone the rich. Thus, gentrification seems to be reaching a limit, imposed by architecture of the place and by the impossibility, enforced by law, to change some of its fundamental characteristics. More than four decades after the Federal Government moved to the Central Plateau of Brazil, market forces were not powerful enough to expel low income families from the place. When Brasilia was decreed World Cultural Heritage by UNESCO (1989), the Vila was included in the perimeter of the area thus considered. Henceforth it was no longer possible to make transformations which implied changes in the fundamental traits of plots, houses, blocks, streets, squares. This has further contributed to slow down market pressures upon the building stock of the Vila and implied the permanence of the lower income families. Architecture has spoken louder as an independent variable.

And yet, the Vila's example does not inspire new urbanistic experiences currently being carried out in the Federal District. There are still unoccupied areas quite close to the metropolitan centre in the Pilot Plan, within or without the area declared Cultural Heritage. Predominantly residential new boroughs are being incorporated, the most recent of them – the Northwest Borough – for 40,000 people. The place is homogeneous concerning the building types – it will be socially homogeneous as well. Buildings resemble those of the traditional superblocks but are much more sophisticated. We have seen the film: it will be an exclusive place for the extremely wealthy.

Why should this be so? Why should we not strive for new boroughs as microcosms of the whole metropolis? Some speculations have been done by members of our research team. Careful attention has been paid to the parceling of the land and the restrictions to build in them, in order to guarantee the local variation that will respond to different social classes' buying power. A wide spectrum of architectural types has been considered, the extremes of which being high towers for posh flats, on the one extreme, plots for single family self-produced houses on another, and a varied collection of other types in between. A reasonable hypothesis, based in the knowledge of the real Brasilia as it exists today, suggests that it is highly probable that such a borough would be physically as well as socially heterogeneous, realizing the fundamental attributes of urbanity. For example, we have compared the *Setor Noroeste* (a new borough westwards the Pilot Plan's North Wing) as it is being incorporated now, with the same borough with an expansion doubling the present size (there is available space in the site). The expansion would have different building types according to the argument put forward above. The result is telling (Fig. 4). Notice how the second scenario, based in real, similar boroughs of the city, is varied in terms of families' income layers: built variety = social variety = urbanity.

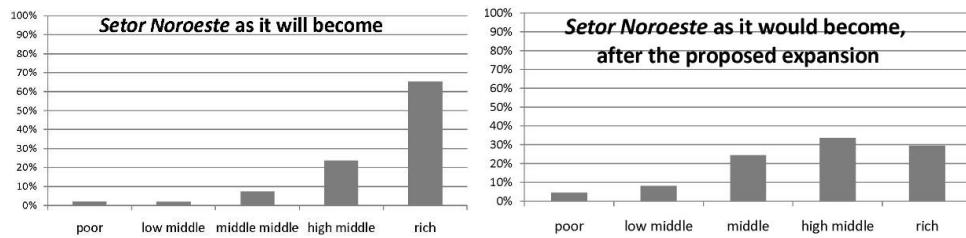


Figure 4 – Graphs of income layers of Setor Noroeste as it will become and as it would become, after our proposed expansion. Rich families decrease from 65,2% to 29,4% while all other income layers increase: poor families rise from 2,1% to 4,5%, low middle from 1,9% to 8,2%, middle from 7,2% to 24,4% and high middle from 23,6% to 33,5% (Source: Tenorio and Santos Júnior, 2010)

The residential scale is not exclusively constituted by the housing stock: the diverse services therein – education, health, public security, religious, post offices, commerce, lodging etc. – are included in the scale. Unfortunately, the same gentrifying logic presides over the monitoring of such spaces, repressing transformations arising from bottom-up strategies of building the city. In one of the most important avenues in the Pilot Plan (South W-3 Avenue) various services have developed aiming at a poorer clientele. Cheaper hotels and lodging houses have appeared, replacing the previous exclusive residential use in the west side of the avenue. The purported reasons for *not* allowing such processes are not morphological but concern land use: they contradict preservation rules. But, again, there is nothing in the legal documents that confirm this. The transformations maintain the essence of the preservation, namely the *scale* of the area. But, it is argued, these are non-conforming uses, and a special place should be defined to house such functions – naturally, far away from sight...

4. On the *bucolic scale*

The bucolic scale makes the transition between city and countryside: a predominantly green landscape, with sparsely constructed buildings of low height. Here locate the embassies, the University of Brasilia main campus and some other institutions. In the immediate periphery of the Pilot Plan the scale is, to the East, in the areas between the residential wings and the lake shore and, to the West, in two large urban parks. But the city's "bucolism" is in the presence of greenery everywhere, in greater or lesser extent (Fig. 5).

Sadly enough, the city gives its back to the lake. The problems concerning the occupation of the lakeshore have their origin in the relation between city and lake and in the mode of occupation of the lake's fringes suggested since the blueprint. Lucio Costa has proposed that only clubs and tourism hotels should be situated here, but these were allowed to privatize the shore in which they were situated. In the end, "tourism hotels" became permanent residences in the form of "flats" (they are "hotels" as well, are they not?...) and huge convention centers have appeared. Progressively, these flat complexes have transformed themselves in actual gated communities for the very wealthy. This is one more instance by which the central bits of the metropolis – namely the Pilot Plan and its immediate vicinity – are progressively occupied by higher income layers.



Figure 5 – The *bucolic scale* is constituted by the predominantly green areas seen in the image, immediately below the residential wings of the Pilot Plan, but generous green areas within the superblocks and other places of the plan are also considered elements of such scale, intermingling with the others (Source: the authors)

On the other hand, there have always been large distances between the residential wings and the lake (despite the fact that the original plan has been dislocated circa 500 meters eastwards, following the competition jury's recommendation). Embassies' plots of land (many of them empty so far), the university campus and other institutions occupy only a small part of it. There are large tracts the occupation of which is ill-defined – or they are simply non-aedificandi land. Also, there are still large bits of the lake margins themselves which have never been occupied.

No wonder the pressure concerning this vacant land is increasing fast. Proposals have been made concerning four large sophisticated hotels by the lake shore. The argument is that there will be a corresponding demand because of the Football World Cup to take place in Brazil. For their headquarters, the embassies have progressively chosen to rent large houses in the South Lake Region (the richest administrative region in the Federal District) instead of building specific edifices in the places destined to them (the latter option is too expensive, they argue). In these plots, the TERRACAP (the land agency of the Federal District) suggests that buildings for services and commerce might be the case.

One way or the other, it is the same old story: gentrification of the most central and privileged parts of the metropolis that have not so far been gentrified. In the case of the remaining tracts of the lakeshore, the tradition of maintaining whatever margins of bodies of water in Brazil *public* should be rescued, instead of building here posh hotels. The tradition was surprisingly broken by Lucio Costa's plan – who had otherwise enormous sensibility for keeping other traits of the Brazilian urban tradition alive in his project (Holanda,

2010). Public space for leisure close to the lake is very much admired by people (particularly the lower income layers) who, despite problems of accessibility, come to the few remaining bits in holidays. The tracts should remain public.

As to vacant land, both in cases in which the use is prescribed (embassies) or otherwise, a new opportunity to rebalance the perverse land structure of the metropolis should be explored: today, 10% of the inhabitants live in the Pilot Plan and immediate surroundings while 44% of the total jobs of the metropolis locate here (it is easy to guess the huge commuting generated by this). Vacant land in the bucolic scale may be occupied by low rise (but high density) housing, in the varied way that Vila Planalto teaches us. No damage to the city's image will result. On the contrary: today, it is the "imageability" (Lynch, 1999) of the site that is damaged by physical discontinuities and unoccupied land. As in Vila Planalto, we are not talking about *exclusive* residential use here: diverse services in support of residential function may spring in the interstices of the residential fabric, in so far as they agree to the building types proper of the bucolic scale – which is *not* the case with what is being currently proposed by TERRACAP.

4. Conclusion

Preserving the many qualities of Brasilia as a World Cultural Heritage Site is an undisputable task. Unfortunately, legal instruments or even a clear doctrine are missing concerning this goal. No official explicit argument exists by which the essential attributes of the city are discussed, let alone defended. Legislation is too economical. It fails in describing the character of the city's various scales by not citing explicitly the morphologic structure that supports them. This gives ample room for arbitrary interpretations and that is where sheer power comes in. Also, there are many common-place beliefs and prejudices concerning the fact that the city is the 4th largest Brazilian metropolis – therefore it needs to adapt itself to this reality – and the refuse to consider it as such. GDF (the local government) and IPHAN (the Heritage and Historical National Institute) often quote Lucio Costa – "Brasilia has no interest in being a large metropolis" – as an explanation for their denial to propose/accept interventions that could, e.g., bring low income families to live closer to the city core (as if Brasilia was only the World Cultural Heritage Site, and not all the metropolitan area that holds circa 3.0 million people). A broad program of Patrimonial Education and an open debate are needed to establish new parameters to ensure not only the physical preservation of the capital but the social diversity in which its inhabitants' culture is based. Hopefully the Preservation Plan for the area declared as World Cultural Heritage, currently under preparation, will be a good starting point for this.

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