

The Dislocation of Brazil's Capital: A Long- Standing Project



Dislocating the capital to Brazil's interior highlands is a long standing project in the country's history. The project was first linked to the transfer of the royal court from Lisbon to the Portuguese America, where a metropolis would be established in what until then had been a colonial purveyor of goods. Until 1953, the quest for a worthy capital involved many factors such as the establishment of a Portuguese empire in the Americas, Portugal's repudiation of an *Ancien Régime* monarchy in the South Atlantic, the formation of a counter hegemony in a former colony, or the construction of a unified, republican, and modern Brazilian nation. As Lúcio Costa—the architect of the final iteration of Brazil's new capital—once put it: “it was a century-old purpose, always postponed.”

By Farès el-Dahdah

IN November 1892, the writer Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis announced to his readers and fellow Cariocas that, to his surprise, Rio de Janeiro was merely the “interim capital of the Union.”¹ Based on Article 3 of Brazil's 1891 Constitution, a law had only recently allowed the creation of a federal commission in charge of demarcating a future Federal District. The *Exploratory Commission of Brazil's Central Plateau*, as it was called, was led by the Belgian-born Luiz Cruls, director of Rio de Janeiro's Astronomic Observatory, whose expedition began in June 1892 and lasted until March 1893. Addressing to the National Congress, on 7th May 1894, Marshal Peixoto reported that Cruls had collected exhaustive information concerning the future Federal District's “geographic position, climate, geologic composition, natural resources, and so on.”²

Considering that the report published by the Cruls's Commission was addressed to a scientific community centered around the Brazilian Historic and Geographic Institute and a public at large avid for news of territorial discovery, Cruls's introductory remarks relied on history as a rhetorical device to legitimate the commission's findings. His report defines, in fact, the master narrative that was to subsequently be employed by politicians and historians alike, i.e., that the central plateau was somehow predestined to become the center of a unified Brazil. A ‘destiny’ would from then on have a recognizable image and its narrative was repeatedly, and retroactively, reinforced by a series of successive causes, be they those of Pombalian reform, imperial dislocation, republican integration, or national identity. If Cruls, the scientist, felt the need to recall historical figures such as Hipólito José da

Costa or Francisco Adolfo de Varnhagen who similarly shared interiorizing tendencies, it was out of a desire to plug into, if not help to construct, a common nation building project.³ Just as history had been co-opted to demonstrate why the central plateau was an ideal site, its climate and geography were the scientific tropes used to attract eventual European immigrants. Auguste Glaziou, the landscape architect who joined Cruls's second expedition, articulated such a Europeanized view of the central plateau by comparing its picturesque qualities with those of Anjou, Normandy, and even Brittany. While a quadrilateral was indeed demarcated by the commission, the selection of the actual site for the future capital was ultimately hampered by competing government-sponsored railway projects, which diverted the expedition away from the newly demarcated Federal District. It was not until the celebration of Brazil's independence centenary (7th September 1922) that a foundational stone was laid for the future capital, nine kilometers from the city of Planaltina. The idea of moving the capital to Planaltina was an idea that had circulated widely enough to be suggested by the French artist Fernand Léger to Le Corbusier, informing him of Brazil's desire to build a new city from scratch. In 1929, the year Le Corbusier first traveled to Brazil, he mentioned “Planaltina” as a “dream that has been on my mind.”⁴

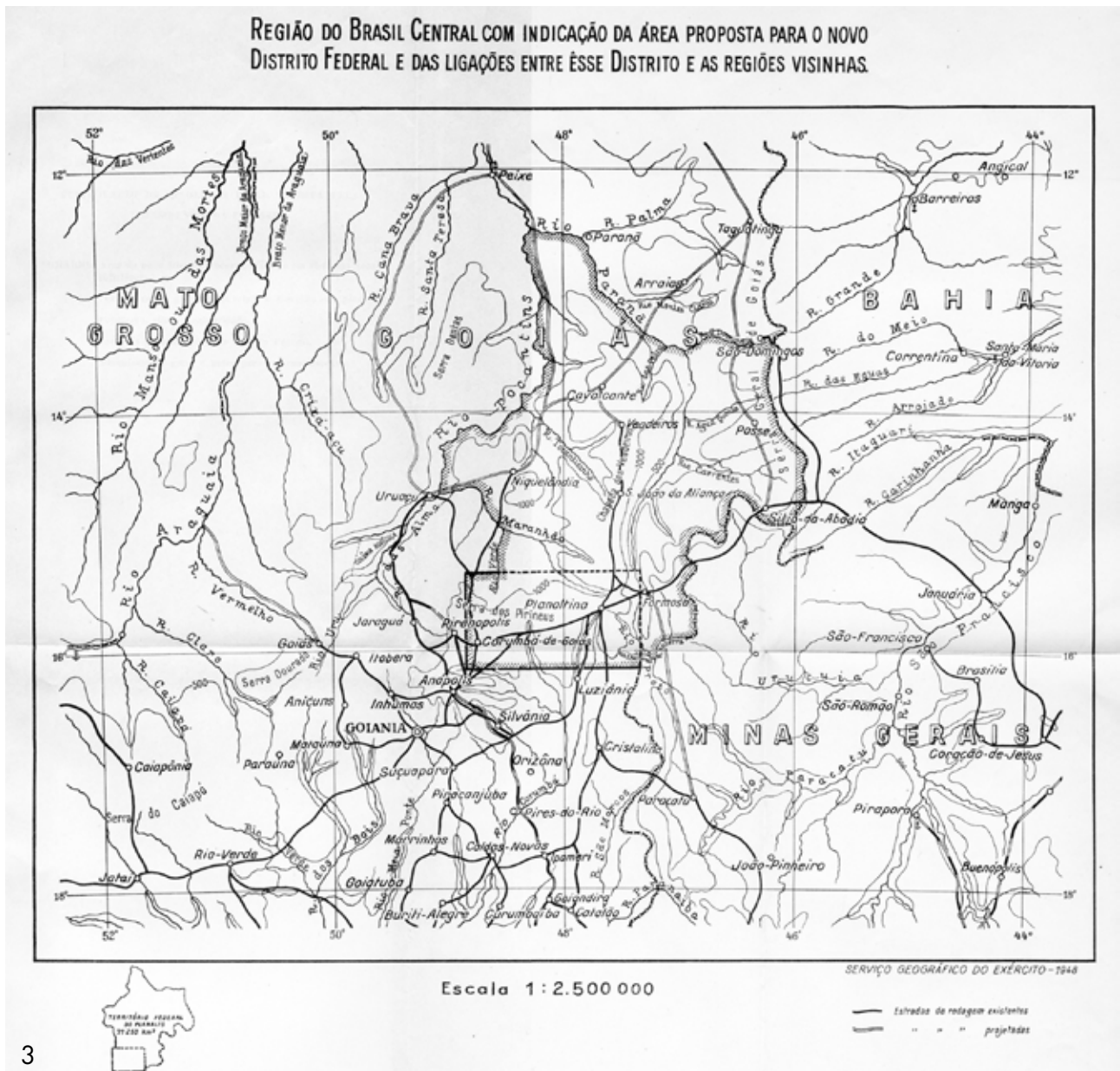
The revolutionary events of 1930 resulted in Getúlio Vargas taking over the presidency and putting an end to the country's first republic. The “Vargas Revolution,” as it was called, sought to define a new urban Brazil wary of its national security and willing to modernize its economic, social, and administrative structures. During Vargas's first regime (1930–1937), discussions regarding the future capital occurred in reference to Brazil's geopolitical redistribution and national security. Mário Augusto Teixeira de Freitas, Director of the Ministry of Education and Public Health's Directorate of Information, Statistics, and Dissemination, suggested, for example, that the Brazilian

< Lúcio Costa, *Brasília Pilot Plan*, 1957, school children celebrating on the Plaza of the Three Powers on inauguration day. Photographed in 1960 by Mário Fontenelle. © Casa de Lúcio Costa.

territory should be subdivided into thirty "units" which would involve moving the capital temporarily to Belo Horizonte before finally settling it in Cruls's quadrilateral, where it would adopt the name of "Ibéria" or "Lusitania."⁵

Four years into Vargas' presidency, the National Assembly enacted a new constitution which stipulated under Article 4 of its "Transitional Dispositions", that "the Union's Capital will be transferred to a central point in Brazil."⁶ This short-lived Constitution kept alive the capital transfer idea in addition to legitimating Vargas's otherwise provisory mandate. Seeing no prospect for reelection and citing communist-fearing events, Vargas led the *coup d'état* of 1937, which inaugurated the *Estado Novo* and led to yet another Constitution that made no mention of Brazil's

future capital. With Vargas deposed in 1945, Congress reintroduced the question of the future capital under Article 4 of the 1946 Constitution's "Transitional Dispositions." A new demarcation commission was formed and Cruls's quadrilateral became part of a much wider territory. On January 5th 1953, Congress finally authorized the executive branch to undertake the definitive studies for the site selection and set the new capital's population at half a million. Vargas created the New Federal Capital Localization Commission led by General Aginaldo Caiado de Castro who contracted the American firm *Donald Belcher & Associates* for the selection of six possible sites for the future capital. In 1955 the Belcher Report was submitted to the commission's new chair, Field Marshal



José Pessoa Cavalcanti de Albuquerque, and among the six color-coded sites, the “chestnut” site was finally chosen on April 15th. In the previous year Cavalcanti de Albuquerque also created a number of advisory sub-commissions including one for Urban planning, which contacted Le Corbusier hoping to have him supervising the planning of the new Brazilian capital despite the commission’s president staunch and decisive opposition. Le

Corbusier however went as far as to propose a five stage process in which he would be responsible for the city’s schematic design and a “pilot plan,” as he called it. The use of such terminology came to represent Le Corbusier’s only direct contribution to the final “Pilot Plan” of Brasilia design competition.

It was the newly elected President, Juscelino Kubitschek, who finally began implementing the capital dislocation

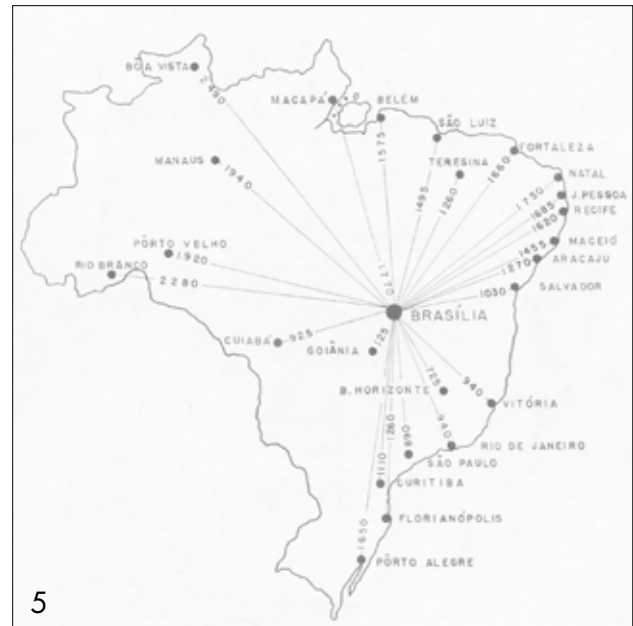


Figure 4. **Mário Augusto Teixeira de Freitas**, *Draft of Brazil's new political map*, 1932. © University of Texas Libraries.

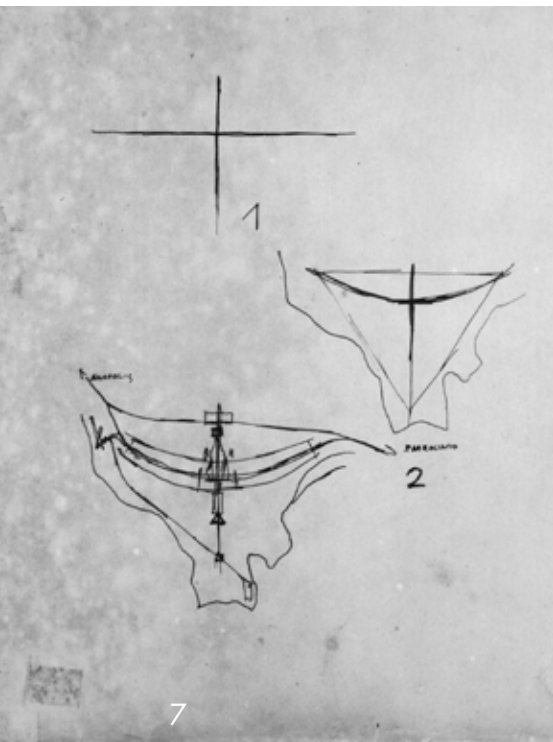
Figure 5. Map of Brazil showing distances between various cities and the future capital, 1957. © Fundação Oscar Niemeyer.

Figure 6. Covers of the first three issues of *Brasília* showing the area of the Federal District, January 1957; the location of the future capital, February 1957; and Lúcio Costa's winning project, March 1957. © Fundação Oscar Niemeyer.

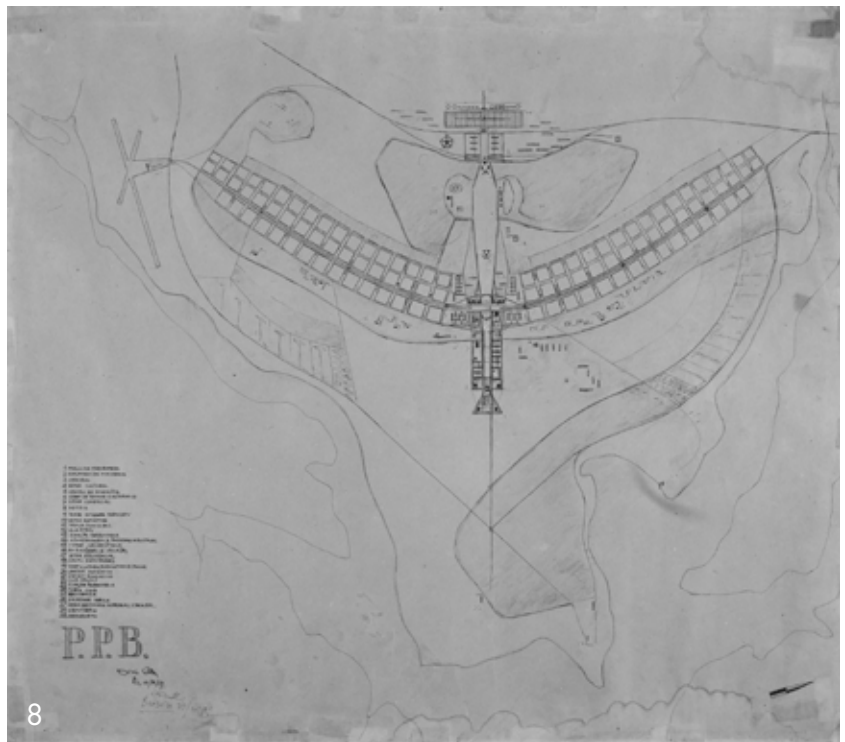
Figure 7. **Lúcio Costa**, *Brasília Pilot Plan*, 1957, vignettes # 1 and 2 of the competition brief. © Casa de Lúcio Costa.

Figure 8. **Lúcio Costa**, *Brasília Pilot Plan*, 1957. © Casa de Lúcio Costa

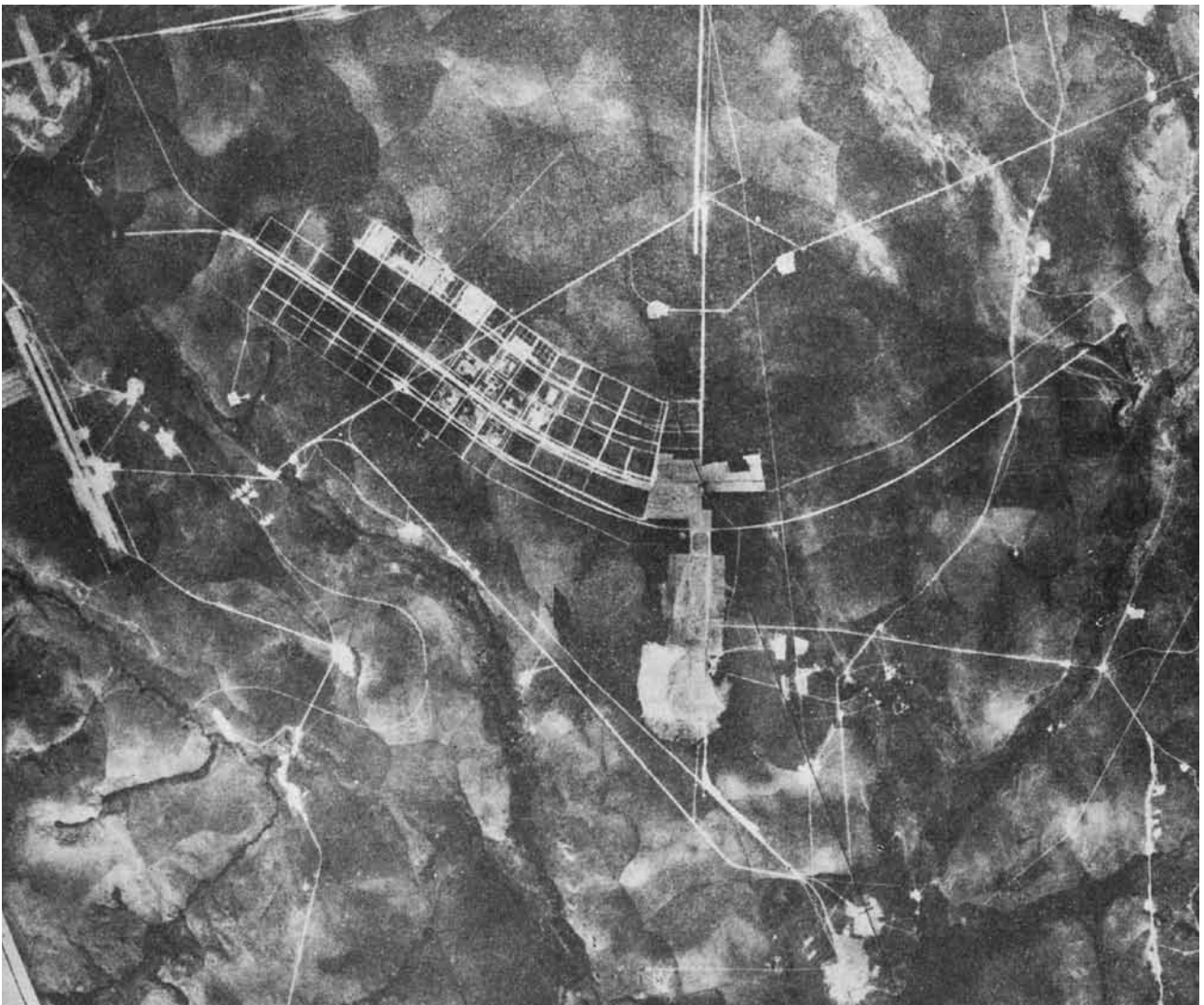
Figure 9 **Lúcio Costa**, *Brasília Pilot Plan*, 1957, bird's eye view of Brasília under construction. Photographed in 1958. © Fundação Oscar Niemeyer.



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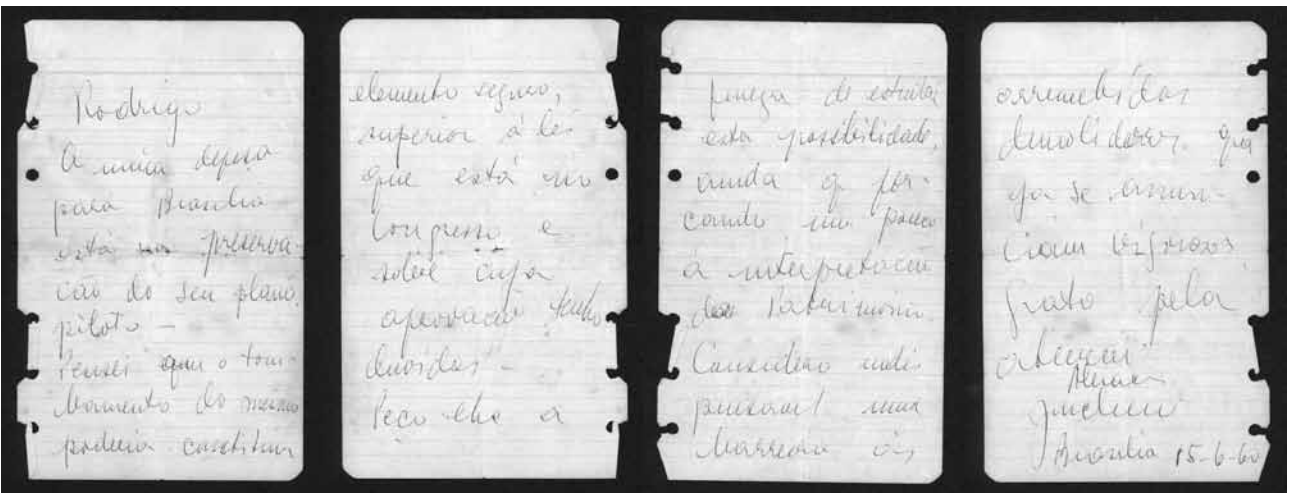


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project in 1956. A few months into his presidency, Kubitschek approved the statute of the national development company, NOVACAP, which was given the task of executing the project for the future capital. NOVACAP organized a national design competition for the city's "pilot plan" and out of the 63 registered participants, 26 presented projects that were evaluated on March 12th, 1957. The jury deliberated until March 16th when it pronounced Lúcio Costa's entry as the winner. Among the other twenty five entries, far more complex and detailed projects were proposed but none was able to encapsulate, as well as Costa's project, a variety of cultural tendencies. Principal among these was Costa's contribution to the symbolic construction of that national void in the center of the country. The first two vignettes—a cross and a triangle—that illustrate Costa's competition brief, for example, operated as two foundational symbols in the construction of a nation building project. While Costa describes the cross as an act of possession, it also refers to Brazil's earlier name of *Terre de Sainte Croix*. The triangle is, of course, an idealized diagram for a democracy tripartite organization but it is also the literal representation of the triangularly shaped map of Brazil. Both cross and triangle therefore occupy a rectangle that since 1893 existed as a void charged with the mandate of contributing to the construction of a national identity. With simple sketches, therefore, Costa was able to load the Brazilian capital with an initial moment of monumental *brasilidade*.

Brasilia was finally conceived, designed and built within the five year span of Kubitschek's presidency. On inauguration day, 21st April 1960, all government officials

and foreign ambassadors made the trip and so did thousands of people who caused the city's first traffic congestion. Festivities had, in fact, begun a day earlier at 4:00 pm on the Plaza of the Three Powers where Kubitschek received the keys to the city from the head of NOVACAP, Israel Pinheiro. That night, at 12:45 am, Pope John XXIII addressed the people of Brazil from the Vatican via live radio. The following morning, at 8:30 am, Kubitschek received the diplomatic corps in the Planalto Palace and an hour later, at 9:30 am; all three branches of government were simultaneously installed in their executive, legislative, and judiciary powers. Military parades were held that afternoon, culminating in a massive fireworks display. That evening, while Brasilia's population partied on the Plaza of the Three Powers, dignitaries dined in tail suits in the Planalto Palace. Barely two months later, had President Kubitschek sent the following note to Rodrigo Mello Franco de Andrade, head of the Ministry of Education's DPHAN:

The only protection for Brasilia is in the preservation of its pilot plan—Adding it to the Heritage Registry would, I think, constitute a safety measure, more so than the law in Congress, the passing of which I doubt. Would you be so gracious as to study the possibility, even if it means slightly forcing the very interpretation of "heritage"? I consider this fortification indispensable against destructive assaults that already seem vigorous. Thank you for your consideration.⁷

It was not until 1987, that the project of Brasilia was finally protected by the Federal District Government Decree Law No. 10.829/1987 and that the city was added to UNESCO's World Heritage List.

Figure 10. Ambassadors waiting to present their letters of credentials outside the Planalto Palace. Photographed in 1960 by Mário Fontenelle. © Casa de Lucio Costa.

Figure 11. Juscelino Kubitschek, note to Rodrigo Melo Franco de Andrade regarding the preservation of Brasilia, 15th June 1960. © Casa de Lucio Costa.

Notes

1. Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, "A Semana," *Gazeta de Notícias*, 20th November 1892, 1.
2. Field Marshal Floriano Peixoto, Message to the National Congress, 7 May 1894.
3. As the editor of the *Correio Brasiliense* from 1808 to 1823, Hipólito José da Costa promulgated the idea of a "Brazil-centric" Portuguese world and called for a new capital inland. In 1849, Francisco Adolfo de Varnhagen published his Organic Paper in which he spelled out in detail the advantages of siting the capital in the interior.
4. Le Corbusier to Paulo Prado, 28 July 1929, *Fondation Le Corbusier Archives*, Paris.
5. Mário Augusto Teixeira de Freitas, "O Reajustamento territorial do quadro politico do Brasil" (1932); quoted in *Serviço de*

Documentação, Antecedentes Históricos 1896-1945, 206.

6. *Constituição da República dos Estados Unidos do Brasil* (16th July, 1934).
7. Juscelino Kubitschek to Rodrigo de Mello Franco de Andrade, note, 15 June 1960, *Casa de Lucio Costa Archives*, Rio de Janeiro.

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