

Lúcio Costa and the Question of Monumentality in his Pilot Plan for Brasilia

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By José Pessôa

LÚCIO Costa's design for Brasilia emphasizes the role of the city as a capital, that is to say, as an expression of State identity and power. In fact, in the presentation text for his pilot plan at the design selection process, he defends the idea that an urban conception envisions the city "not only as *urbis*; but also a *civitas*", possessing a Capital's inherent attributes. He identifies the need to confer the "desirable monumental quality" of the urban environment, associating the idea of monumentality with factors propitious to create a suitable culture for reverie and intellectual speculation in the future city, thus favoring an important dimension of urban life.

It is interesting to note that, the link between modern urbanism and monumentality proposed by Lúcio Costa, sparked one of the most heated debates during the construction of Brasilia. In the years the Modern Movement was affirmed, the idea of monumentality was entirely associated with totalitarianism and/or the beaux-arts culture, to the extent that Lewis Mumford stated in his book published in 1938: "The Culture of the Cities" is that "if it is modern, it cannot be a monument."¹ The aims of modern architecture and urbanism are to be functional, based on adequately providing the material needs of a contemporary design for collective life, and that would dispense with monumental gestures in terms of any identity statement.

As such, the perception of the possibility of modern urbanism to incorporate the monumentality dimension—without this being an expression of a totalitarian state, such as the experiences under the fascist, Nazi and Stalinist regimes in the 1930/1940s, or eclectic/beaux arts culture before the first-world war—is a fundamental question in understanding the urban solution adopted in Brasilia.

The monumentality of modern architecture was an American issue, that is to say, in the Americas and not Europe. It is not a coincidence that in New York in 1943 the exiled Europeans Josep Lluís Sert, Sigfried Giedion and Fernand Leger discussed the question of the new monumentality and produced a manifest.

In 1948, the English magazine, "The Architectural Review"² sought to air this debate in Europe by publishing a special edition about the issue, coordinated by J. M. Richards. This introduced the question by stating that the battle against the historic revivalists had already been won and, therefore, the time had arrived for the modern movement to develop a richer and wider vocabulary to expand on answers beyond merely material functions, also including the moral and emotive building, functions, particularly for the programs involving government headquarters, cinemas, sports arenas, and public libraries. Seven architects and scholars with ties to the modernist movement were invited to answer three questions: "what is monumentality?"; "is monumentality desirable?" and "how to achieve monumentality?"

Lúcio Costa was, among these, and described in the magazine as: *Divisional Director of the Department of Artistic and Historical Monuments* and leader of the modern architectural movement in Brazil.

The symposium would also have been the first rather curious meeting between the judge, William Holford, and Lúcio Costa, the winner of the Brasilia selection process, which never actually happened, as the participants sent their answers in writing.

Lúcio Costa's answers provide important reading material to understand his conception of modern urbanism and the guidelines for his future project in Brasilia. In his own words: *what characterizes the modern conception of urbanism, stretching from the town to the suburbs and thence into the country, is that it abolishes the picturesque by incorporation the bucolic into the monumental.* The main innovation for him would be the union of nature with urban life. However, in a vision distinct to the work carried out building modern garden cities, Lúcio Costa offset the bucolic idea—trees, undergrowth and fields in the natural setting—against the idea of the picturesque—comprised of winding streets, individual houses and gardens in districts. In addition, his notion was that this particular dimension of nature, the bucolic, eliminated the picturesque dimension in the cities. The garden city of Howard, Unwin and

Parker, would be replaced by the concept of the city park proposed by the Brazilian architect in his memorial pilot plan.

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Ten years later, it was around this perception of monumentality in the design of the Brazilian capital that a heated national and international debate began. It was not until after the 1970s that the main accusation about Brasilia was made clear, as being an excessively and rigidly zoned city. At the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s, what really caused the most controversy was the perception of monumental aspects in the design project. As stated by a competitor, the architect Marcelo Roberto, the design proposed by Lúcio Costa appeared to be more appropriate to obsolete and out-of-date 19th city planning than for a modern Brazilian capital³. Lúcio Costa rebutted these and other accusations by asking: "why in a democracy a city necessarily needs be spoiled by grandiosity, perhaps by ostentatious and emphatic grandiose styles, but not those that naturally occur from a simple and functional design conceived with these intentions. This is particularly true when dealing with a capital city, always unique, despite the differing levels of socialization throughout the rest of the country".⁴

If we analyze Lúcio Costa's Pilot Plan we see that, in fact, it was not a design for a large-scale 19th city either in terms of the public buildings suggested or its overall scope; or with the skyscrapers of Le Corbusier's city living design. In fact, most of Brasília buildings were modest in their proportions. What Lúcio Costa provided, with his concept of park city, was a mixture of images from 19th century urbanism capitals.

The residential superblocks are not as monumental as modern skyscrapers, for example. According to the architect, they reflect the scale of the 19th century Paris in their six-floor design, but not in any of the distinct forms or building-street relationship in Brasília, which are completely subverted by the presence of nature.

The more direct reference to 19th century urbanism is the concern to build monumental and residential axes by using terraces on several different levels, which not only help to build highways and service roads without crossings, but also to guarantee a series of monumental landscape views, notably from the ministries esplanades. This idea corresponds to the classic-baroque urbanism tradition. Along with this esplanade—a Mall, as the Eng-

lish call it—were broad sweeping lawns to be used by pedestrians and parades, with the congressional building at the end. It is interesting to note that the development of the design for Congress, by Oscar Niemeyer, would alter the original dimension determined by Lúcio Costa for the Esplanade. The design project will occupy far more space than in the original plan, implying a consequent broadening of the esplanade for the ministries.

At a lower level than the Esplanade, this is thought of as an open square, and it is modern in the sense that it is styled similar to Luis XV's 19th century *Place de la Concorde*, the limits of which are not defined in its architecture. One of the buildings was placed at each angle of a square—*Praça dos 3 Poderes*—with Government House and the Supreme Court occupying the base of the triangle, and Congress at the apex. It is open to natural low-lying and stunted vegetation, a microcosm of the type of confrontation between the governmental offices and nature, reaffirming the American odyssey to conquer and assert land ownership rights. This stark original contrast has been somewhat smudged by a series of unplanned occupations on the first level.

A final element used to translate and convey the idea of monumental in its urbanism is the television tower, as its design was part of the original sketches presented by Lúcio Costa for the design selection process. The tower is thought of in its urban dimension, reflecting the image of obelisks in terms of its huge scale, pure form and symmetry, as well as classic illuminist abstract designs from the 18th century. A modern characteristic in a world with television and radio; being the only real monument building in the city. In a sketch of the monumental axis done for the selection process, the television tower is the only vertical element in the composition.

An understanding of Brazil's contribution to the experience of modern urbanism in the 20th century, and in Lúcio Costa's design for Brasília, is shown in a reading of his contribution that goes well beyond any translation of the Athens Charter principles, by his unique way of recovering certain aspects of urban tradition consolidated in the 19th century.



Figure 1. Photo by Marcel Gautherot, Arquivo Central do IPHAN.

Figure 2. The monumental area today, with the Judiciary Esplanade on the right. Photo by Joana França.

Notes

1. L. Mumford "A cultura das cidades". Belo Horizonte: Itatiaia, 1961 (1938).
2. J M Richards, "In search of a new monumentality" in *The Architectural Review*, vol 104, n. 624, September 1948.
3. Interview published in the newspaper *Correio da Manhã* (Rio de Janeiro), March 24th, 1957.
4. Letter published in the newspaper *Correio da Manhã* (Rio de Janeiro), March 27th, 1957.

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