

Brasilia. Monumentality Issues

40



Lucio Costa proposes an *urbs* and a *civitas* in his winning entry for the Brasilia competition (1957). The new seat of citizenship was to celebrate the March to the West dreamt by Brazilian Independence's Patriarch José Bonifácio (1823)—who named the new capital—and taken up by president Juscelino Kubitschek (1955)—who promised fifty years of progress in five. Brasilia was to be a machine for remembering past, present and future hopes. Therefore, it had to be a memorable object itself, composed of memorable elements; differentiation from context counted in all levels. Like Costa, Oscar Niemeyer knew that common monumental features included volumetric simplicity, unusual size, scale or shape and extraordinary richness, as shown by his *Palácio da Alvorada*, the presidential residence (1956).

By Carlos Eduardo Comas

ENDOWED with a striking colonnade, the *Palácio da Alvorada* proclaims its residential condition by recalling the nineteenth century plantation houses near Rio. In order to make an object's purposes recognizable as monumental, differentiation from context cannot be complete. Beaux-Arts trained Costa and Niemeyer sustaining that designing a monument involved reiterating or evoking formal precedents, as well as reiterating or evoking qualities that are culturally associated with it. Characterization was a statement of lineage and hierarchy, of mood and attributes. Moreover, both knew that those formal precedents could be concrete figures or abstract schemes and needed not to be architectural in either case.

Thus Costa starts with a cross and then transforms it into a bow and arrow pointing westward. The sign of foundation becomes a sign of propulsion. The curved residential highway axis adds the movement imagery. The straight monumental axis accommodates the main institutional buildings and stands for stability. The monumental sector is separated from the ordinary functional city with no loss of visibility. Resemblances to a bird and an airplane reinforce the plan's iconicity and facilitate its recollection.

The National Civic Center sits atop a wide embankment rising above the surrounding savannah like a cruiser riding the waves. The triangular *Square of the Three Powers* at the western end, is at once stern and quay, with buildings on three sides like Lisbon's old *Terreiro do Paço*—now *Praça do Comércio* before the Tagus river, or Rio's namesake—now *Praça XV de Novembro* before Guanabara Bay. The Esplanade of the Ministries brings to mind the Washington Mall and the first independent American colonies. The depiction of the politic body is quite literal. The Capitol, the Supreme Court and the Government Palace stand at the head of the composition; the ministries

occupy its arms. The equivalence of the three powers is conveyed in an elementary and effective way; and the same applies to the links entertained by the Executive and Legislative branches with the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Justice, whose formal treatment contrasts with the standard Ministry building. An obelisk, the Telecommunications Tower at the highest spot, follows the lead of the Eiffel Tower and reaffirms the alliance of the city with technical progress and media. Brasilia is presented as the hub of a vast and mostly unsettled nation, proud of its brand-new automobile industry and eager to increase its air routes, marching to the west with a new-found enthusiasm for democracy—but mindful of its heritage.

Niemeyer adds to Costa's rhetoric the representation of the Capitol as balance, emphasizing the duality of the National Congress and the individuality of its constituent parts. The eye feasts on peristyles, domes, arcades, pairings and symmetries, sweeping prospects, marbles, mirrors, gilt, sculptures, pools, fountains, a grove of palm trees. Norma Evenson gave the most perceptive account of the monumental sector nearing completion.

For much of the year, the sky is filled with scudding clouds bathing the site in shifting light and shadow, steam often sustaining the illusion of greater substance than the man-made structures below. The buildings seem to have been placed by a magician's hand, creating an apparition which strikes the vision with hallucinatory clarity. There is no emphatic or secure sense of possessing awareness of the ephemeral, a melancholy and sophisticated perception of how tenuous is man's grasp of earth and how transient are his work.

The exterior colonnade of the Alvorada Palace recalls the lozenges that feature in the national flag since the Independence, the festoons that adorn the Imperial flag, the diamonds that gave the name to Diamantina, Kubitschek's home town. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs takes its cue from the Neo-classical Itamaraty Palace in Rio. The underground Cathedral is bathed in light coming through glass panes between the ribs that fashion a

drum-like crown of thorns. Yet, one enters it after going down by a ramp and wandering through dark spaces reminiscent of catacombs. Statues watch over the ramp, evoking the colonial sanctuary of Congonhas do Campo. An egg and womb seem a suitable dome for the baptistery. After all, man has to die before being reborn by a few drops of holy water and the Church pretends to be both the Bride of Christ and the mother of Christendom. It is almost Social Realism gone Modern.

Alvorada, Planalto and Supreme Court are elongated volumes with one-story high galleries or lower basements. At the Alvorada, Planalto and Supreme Court, the peristyle runs along the big sides only; small façades are open. Both the Supreme Court and the Alvorada box rise over partly underground basements. Binary oppositions and similarities create two sets of pairs, answering to the programmatic complementarity of the Alvorada and Planalto palaces and to the situational complementarity of the Planalto and the Supreme Court. The Planalto ground floor gallery reinforces the allusion to government palaces facing a square, like Palladio's Basilica in Vicenza. The kinship of the Supreme Court, with the antique temple is strengthened by the access ramp, aligned with the longitudinal axis of the box; the two rows of columns, point to the reconstructed Etruscan temple in the grounds of Rome's Villa Giulia.

The central void at the Alvorada and Planalto palaces is a common feature shared with relevant Brazilian traditional and modern buildings, whether residential (such as the colonial Casa do Bandeirante), institutional (such as the paradigmatic Ministry of Education building), or mixed ones (such as Costa's Museum of the Missions or Niemeyer's Ouro Preto Grand Hotel). The institutional character is strengthened by the thrust of the ramp and rostrum beyond the Planalto opening, while nothing obstructs the gaze at the counterpart in the residential Alvorada. Gender connotations conventionally associated with work and domesticity are reinforced by the opposition between the columns at both buildings. Stamo Papadaki compared the Alvorada columns to caryatids, and he strikes a right chord, for those are bulging, bellied, folding, static figures in comparison with their counterparts at the Planalto and the Supreme Court. For though both barely seem to touch the ground, these are lean and taut like a Spanish bullfighter or a Minoan dancer and can certainly be compared to graceful atlantes. Lightness and grace go together, and grace, according to Costa, was the special contribution of Brazil to Modern Architecture.

By the way, Le Corbusier himself had set apart *architecture mâle* and *architecture femelle* in his *Modulor*. At the National Congress, the phallic towers connotation contrasts with the feminine domes, connotations. Both bal-

ance and balanced coupling can be read in the composition. Costa emphasizes foundation. Fecundation—and fecundity—definitely count among Niemeyer's concerns. Pampulha, for instance, is a case of plump Dance Hall and angular Yacht Club leading to a Casino.

Binary oppositions and similarities organize the next pair of palaces too. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Justice buildings are squares, and their peristyles are two-story-high arcades completely enclosing the glass box. At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the arcades are sculptural, like the Alvorada colonnades, and display round arches in all sides. In the Palace of Justice, pairs of opposite sides contrast. Flat arcades with round arches in a robust Romanesque spirit at the front and rear give way to a muscular version of the Corbusian "ondulatoires". A reflecting pool surrounds the two palaces. At the Ministry of Justice, water falls noisily from giant gargoyles.

Built with exoskeletons, the Cathedral and the National Theater stand in the adjoining cultural sector. Both display the frame of a tent on a cave-like basement. Spectators also have to go underground to reach their goal. The sanctuary is a hyperboloid of revolution on a circular plan that shares a platform with the baptistery egg and the menorah-like bell tower. The play of volumes points to Renaissance Florence. Glazed surfaces extend between the curved sculptural ribs of the sanctuary and the plain straight ribs on the short sides of the theater.

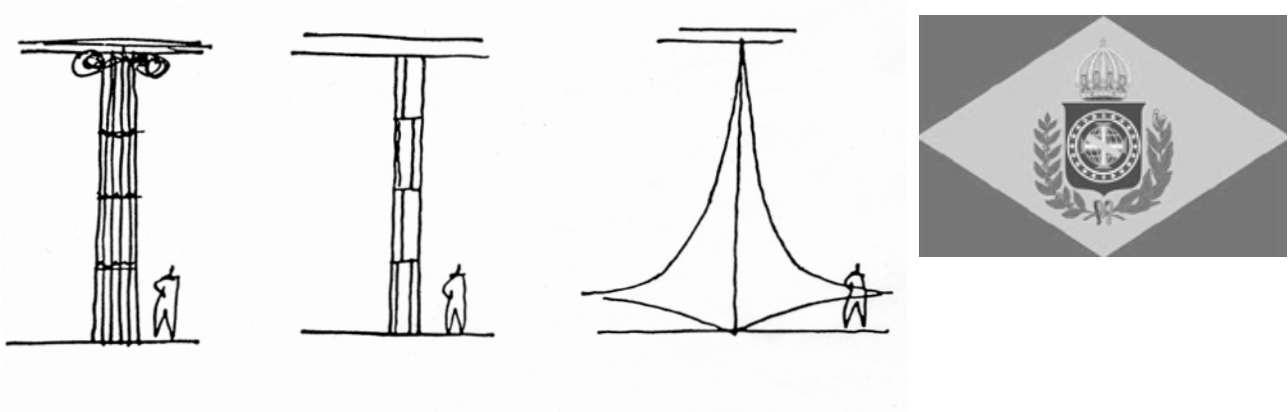
Mostly transparent, the hyperboloid is a modern *Duomo*, a counterpoint to Le Corbusier's assembly hall in Chandigarh. Inside, the intense light celebrates the mystery of Christian resurrection—and the victory over the chthonic Homeric world. Built as a parabolic dome next to the actual burial chamber, it was the largest space without supports before the Pantheon. The kinship with Niemeyer's composition is hardly accidental, as Lucas Mayerhofer insinuates. Mostly opaque, the theater bows to Mies and his Mannheim project, as Niemeyer himself states on his memoir. Two opposite auditoria flank the scenic box, but the fly-tower does not protrude, probably to avoid competition with the National Congress or the Tower of Telecommunications.

Despite the importance of pairing (all connotations admitted) in the whole design process, from a topological point of view, all these buildings have similar *partis*. They can be thought of as particular crystallizations of a single general matrix of parallel plates and rows of supports that stand on the perimeter of those plates. Furthermore, from elongated to squares' box, from pyramid to hyperboloid, a transformation process is being staged, and that staging is a reflection of what the building of the new capital was about.

For Costa, Le Corbusier was the Brunelleschi of the century because his work set the bases of a true style, that is, a coherent system of elements and principles of composition based on elements of architecture reduced to their essential geometry. Studying Le Corbusier's designs as well as his words, Costa and Niemeyer soon realized that, in terms of norm, the *Dom-ino* type structure was preferential rather than imperative. The architectural system had to incorporate both the dome and the load-bearing wall. Costa first claimed that Modern architecture was an inclusive proposition in his memoir of the University City (1937). Monumental Brasilia is the outcome of a thinking that prizes diversity of character within a complex but integrated system.

At the same time, in the Cold War context, Brasilia is part of an ongoing struggle about the expression of

democratic monumentality, and the cantilever zero situation—the outward expression of structure—is part of a Classicist bent that can be traced back to Perret in the 1930s, including Mies's Crown Hall and Durrell Stone's American Embassy in India in the first half of the 1950s. And the palaces of Brasilia precede or are contemporary with works like Lincoln Center and the National Gallery in Berlin. Their affinities are undeniable, as is their antagonism towards the archaizing brutalism of Le Corbusier, who had altered beyond recognition Costa's project for the Brazil House at the Cité Universitaire de Paris. However, Niemeyer's experiments indicate an independent streak, a sort of Free Classicism in comparison to the rather more generic Neo-Classical aura of Mies, but clear of the kitsch that plagues Lincoln Center and American embassies.



References

- Comas, Carlos Eduardo. *Précisions brésiliennes sur un état passé de l'architecture et l'urbanisme modernes, d'après les projets et les oeuvres de Lúcio Costa, Oscar Niemeyer, MWM Roberto, Affonso Reidy, Jorge Moreira et cie.*, 1936-45. (doctoral thesis, Université de Paris VIII, 2002).
- "Modern architecture, Brazilian corollary," *AA Files* 36 (2000), 3-13.
- Comas, Carlos Eduardo, and David Leatherbarrow. "Solving problems, making art, being modern." *Journal of Architectural Education* vol. 64 issue 1 (Sept 2010), 65-68.
- Costa, Lúcio. "Memória descritiva do Plano Piloto" in Lúcio Costa, *Lúcio Costa: Registro de uma vivência*. (São Paulo: Empresa das Artes, 1995), 283-297.
- "Monlevade 1934, projeto rejeitado." *Ibidem*, 91-99.
- "Cidade Universitária." *Ibidem*, 173-190.
- "Considerações sobre a arte contemporânea." *Ibidem*, 245-258.
- "Ingredientes" da concepção urbanística de Brasília." *Ibidem*, 282.
- "Imprévu et importance de la contribution des architectes brésiliens au développement de l'architecture contemporaine." *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui* 42-43 (1952), 4-7.
- De Oliveira, Marcelo Puppi. "Unfinished spaces: Le Corbusier, Lúcio Costa and the Brazil House saga." *DE QUINCY, Quatremère. Encyclopédie Méthodique* (Paris: Panckouke, 1788), voix Caractère. *Arqtexto* 12 (2008/2).
- Evenson, Norma. *Two Brazilian Capitals. Architecture and Urbanism in Rio de Janeiro and Brasília* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973), 204-205.
- Galantay, Ervin Y. *New towns: antiquity to the present*. (New York: Braziller, 1975), 7-8, plate 3.
- Guadet, Julien *Eléments et Théorie de l'Architecture* (Paris: Librairie de la construction moderne, 1904), 132
- Le Corbusier. *Le Modulor 1* (Basel: Birkhauser, 2000 [1952]), 224.
- Loeffer, Jane C. *The architecture of diplomacy: building American embassies* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998)
- Mayerhofer, Lucas. *Introdução ao estudo dos tetos abobadados. Sua origem e evolução na antiguidade* (Rio: ed. do autor, 1950), plate V, 57.
- Niemeyer, Oscar. "Palácio residencial de Brasília." *Módulo 7* (1957): 2. "Official theatres in the cultural sector of Brasília." *Módulo 17* (1960): 6.
- Papadaki, Stamo. *Oscar Niemeyer* (New York: Braziller, 1960), 29.
- Santos, Paulo F. *A arquitetura da sociedade industrial*. (Belo Horizonte: UFMG, 1961), 160-83.

Carlos Eduardo Comas

Studied architecture in Porto Alegre, Philadelphia and Paris and has written and lectured extensively on modern Brazilian architecture and urbanism. He is Full Professor at Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, Brazil; editor of its Graduate Program in architecture journal *ARQTEXTO*, and chair of Docomomo Brazil.