Brasilia, the Palace of Congress and their Urban Changes
We must build what is superfluous, because what is necessary will be built anyway; the superfluous must be built now, because it will be necessary in the future and if we don’t do it now, the town may atrophy, it may not be fully accomplished. I want to do the entire structure, I want to leave the city skeleton assembled, and lightened.

President Juscelino Kubitschek, commenting Brasilia under construction

Once President Juscelino Kubitschek received the approval of the National Congress to transfer the Federal Capital of Brazil from Rio de Janeiro to a still non-built city, there was no time to waste. The master plan, by Lúcio Costa, was selected in 1957. As strong national symbols were necessary, Costa’s design located all civic buildings along a monumental axis, sited directly on the natural landscape and apart from the urban area. This axial strategy was highly successful, as it allowed this area to be formally configured and almost completed for the inauguration of Brasilia, three years and a month later.

Its main ensemble—the Palace of Congress, designed by Niemeyer and his team—would become both an icon of Brasilia to the country and a symbol of Brazilian modern architecture to the world. And more, an essential element of the urban plan: there, urbanism and architecture effectively created the landscape, with the strength of a second nature (...). Here is presented a brief study of the relationship between Niemeyer’s building and Costa’s urban plan [figure 1], and their influence over each other.

The Congress in the Plan

Lúcio Costa’s sketches of the Pilot Plan already show a preliminary delineation of some architectural elements. Among them the Palace of Congress, to be developed by Niemeyer and his team, along with other palaces.

Costa created a tall office building for the Congress, which he displaced to the north side of the mall, leaving centralized a horizontal prism with a dome on top housing the assemblies—a synthesis between the asymmetrical implantation of the Cidade Universitária—of which he kept a “Palm Tree Forum proposed in 1936 by Le Corbusier”—and the articulation of the United Nations Building in New York, where the horizontal building with a dome opens over two plazas. Yet it leaves a 50 meter-wide strip on the south side that integrates both of them—along with the repetition of the mirror pool theme in different places—connecting the Esplanade of Ministries and the Plaza of the Three Powers in a single public space. Natural vegetation would come near to the Congress building, through a “neck” conformed by the intersection of the linear plateau of the Esplanade and the 9,5 meters lower triangle of the Plaza. In front of the building another square ending the Esplanade would be configured, formed by a mirror pool, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice—both designed as small squared prisms, differently from the ten-storey slabs of the other ministries [figure 2].

Costa’s plan has undergone changes from the competition–winning sketches to the initially built town, and the design for the Parliament building played a role in this process. In Brazil, the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies were formed as two completely different institutions, which originally occupied different buildings—Palácio Monroe and Palácio Tiradentes—in Rio de Janeiro. The new Congress should express not only one assembly, with one dome and one office tower, but two, with two different office towers for both institutions.

Niemeyer’s solution was the horizontal building perpendicular to the Esplanade, so that the two assemblies would be equally viewed, in front of not one but two twin office towers, opened to north and south, with blind walls facing east and west. Over the platform the assemblies were symbolized by two domes—one of them inverted—corresponding to the Senate and to the Chamber of Deputies [figure 3]. The design came along with some changes to the plan: the central mall was enlarged from 180 meters to 200-meter-wide, so that Chamber
The west sloped area replaced the now lost frontal square, connected to the special ministries on the sides—which were kept and were specifically designed by Niemeyer a few years later. The loss of this public space, the twisting of the horizontal block, and the triangle reposition completely disconnected the frontal square from the Plaza of the Three Powers. That disconnection still causes some touristic and ceremonial confusion, since the main access to the Congress has almost no connection to the Plaza where the other Palaces are and the visitors just can’t find a way to walk from one to the others [figures 4 a, b].

The Congress after the plan
Juscelino Kubitschek’s political strategy did work. The symbolic town skeleton was ready in 1960, and it worked as a development focus for the central part of the Brazilian territory, as expected.
Figure 1. Pilot Plan of Brasilia. Lúcio Costa sketches. Esplanade and Plaza of Three Powers. Casa Lúcio Costa

Figure 2. Plaza of Three Powers. Lúcio Costa sketches. Competition preliminary studies. Casa Lúcio Costa

Figure 3. Palace of Congress. Oscar Niemeyer study with domes over. Personal collection, Matheus Gorovitz
1. National Congress Palace
2. Ministry of Justice
3. Ministry of Foreign Affairs

1. National Congress Palace 23,137 m²
2. Chamber of Deputies and Senate – Annex I 29,174 m²
3. Chamber of Deputies – Annex II – 1965 27,602 m²
5. Chamber of Deputies – Annex IV – 1978 49,257 m²
6. Chamber of Deputies – Area available for growth
8. Senate – Annex III: Future building
9. Senate – Auditory – Future building

Figure 4. Plaza of Three Powers.
Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, 1957
Left: Lúcio Costa, March 1957
Right: Oscar Niemeyer, July 1957
Computer-aided design from originals and sketches.
Danilo Matoso Macedo and Elcio Gomes da Silva

Figure 5. Plaza of Three Powers, Palace of Congress and Annexes, 2010
Computer-aided design from originals and sketches.
Danilo Matoso Macedo and Elcio Gomes da Silva
After the inauguration, however, the actual demands of the institutions revealed to be much bigger than what those emblematic buildings would support. As Brasilia would not be for some years a fully functional town, the institutions had to cope with the heavy burden of providing full infra-structure for its populations. This need for support, along with the natural administration growth, soon brought the need for new annexes to almost every building. Such is the case of the Congress, with five new additions. All designed by Niemeyer and his team, when commissioned by authorities [figure 5].

Before Brasilia was listed as world heritage, in 1987, the surrounding natural landscape was entirely divided into large lots destined to house several institutions—mostly judiciary—that were originally placed in more central and denser areas, in smaller buildings. Their political power allowed the construction of a full sequence of ten-storey-high, 200-meter-long buildings at the south side of the plaza—all of them also designed by Niemeyer and in some way formally descendant from Chamber of Deputies’ ten-storey Annex IV. A kind of Judiciary esplanade is being built today, but with no proper urban or planning strategy. The Congress itself, owning the surrounding areas, will continue to grow [figure 6].

This new reality faces us with different development and conservation problems for that region. Is it possible to triplicate the total original area of the Monumental zone without radically changing its original characteristics? Moreover, some original intentions—those listed by World Heritage—were never fulfilled. Should those intentions—such as a better connection between the Congress and the Plaza—still be pursued? The key to these questions, we believe is to understand both historical values and contemporary demands.

References

Notes
1. In 1956, before the competition for the urban plan, the presidential palace was already being designed by Oscar Niemeyer. See: Niemeyer, 1956
2. Costa, Lima, e Costa, 1985, 38
4. See Costa, Lima, e Costa, 1985, 27. See also: Leitão, 2003, 93
5. Both palaces were Eclectic buildings with single domes. See Macedo, 2010, also Segre e Barki, March 2010. A competition was held in 1904 in order to choose a design for a single Palace of Congress. The design winner, by Heitor de Mello, was a single-domed building inspired on the North-American Capitol. See Brenna, 1987
6. Some of these sketches were published in: Gorovitz, 1985
7. For a study on the annexes see: Silva e Sánchez, 2007

References

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