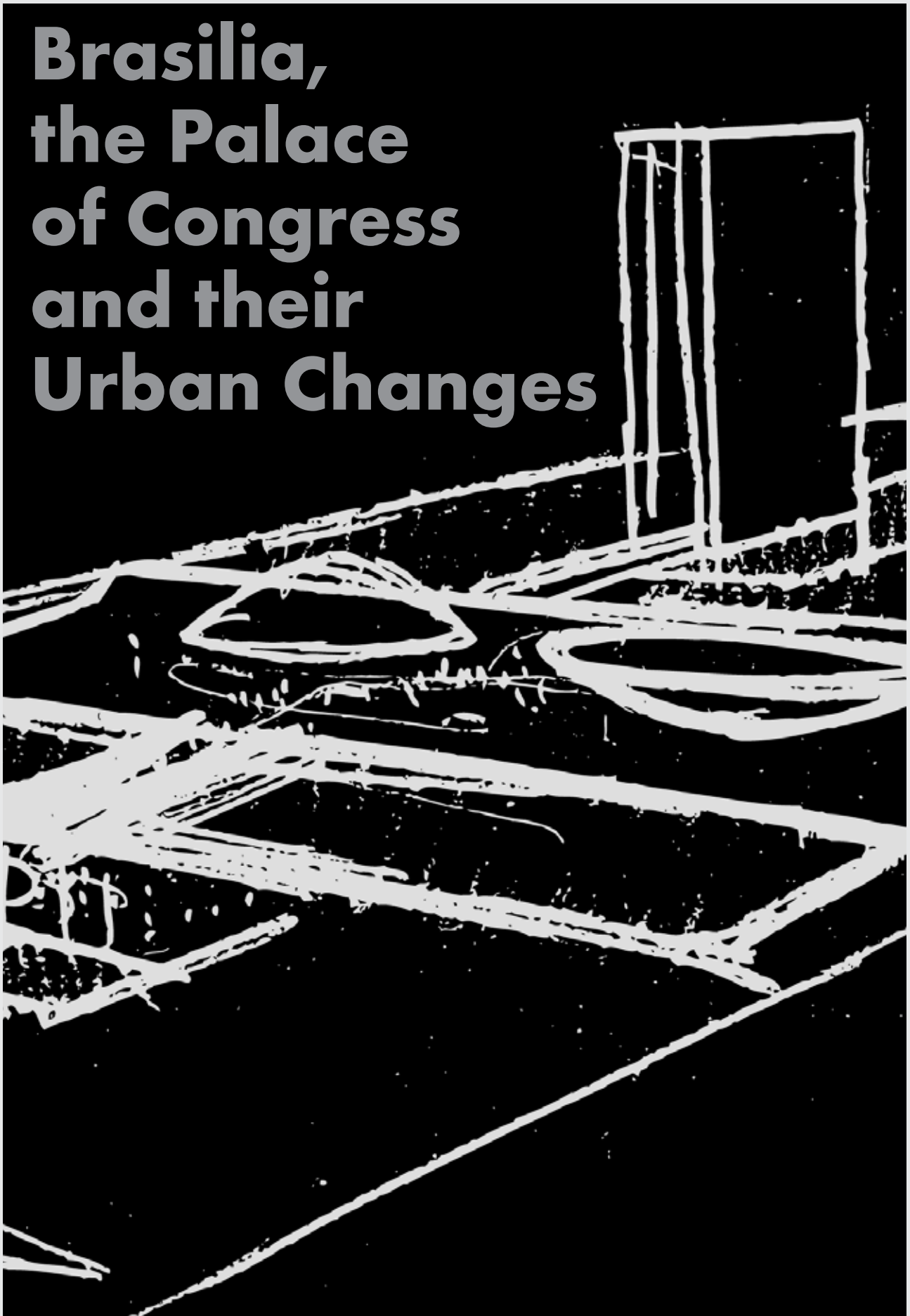


Brasilia, the Palace of Congress and their Urban Changes



The Palace of Congress in Brasilia, designed by Oscar Niemeyer in 1958, played an effective role in defining its urban context. Lúcio Costa's original competition sketches show one tower, with a domed horizontal building. Niemeyer conciliated the different levels of the frontal Esplanade and of the lower Plaza behind, rotating it, and placing two domes and two towers instead of one, representing the two legislative institutions housed. The building presence amidst a vast green area became the main symbol of Brasilia. In the last 50 years, however, its surroundings gave place to several new institutional buildings designed by Niemeyer himself.

By Danilo Matoso Macedo and Elcio Gomes da Silva

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.¹ 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 (...) its presence was incorporated to the horizon...*² 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.³ 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,⁴ 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.⁵ 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 solution⁶ 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

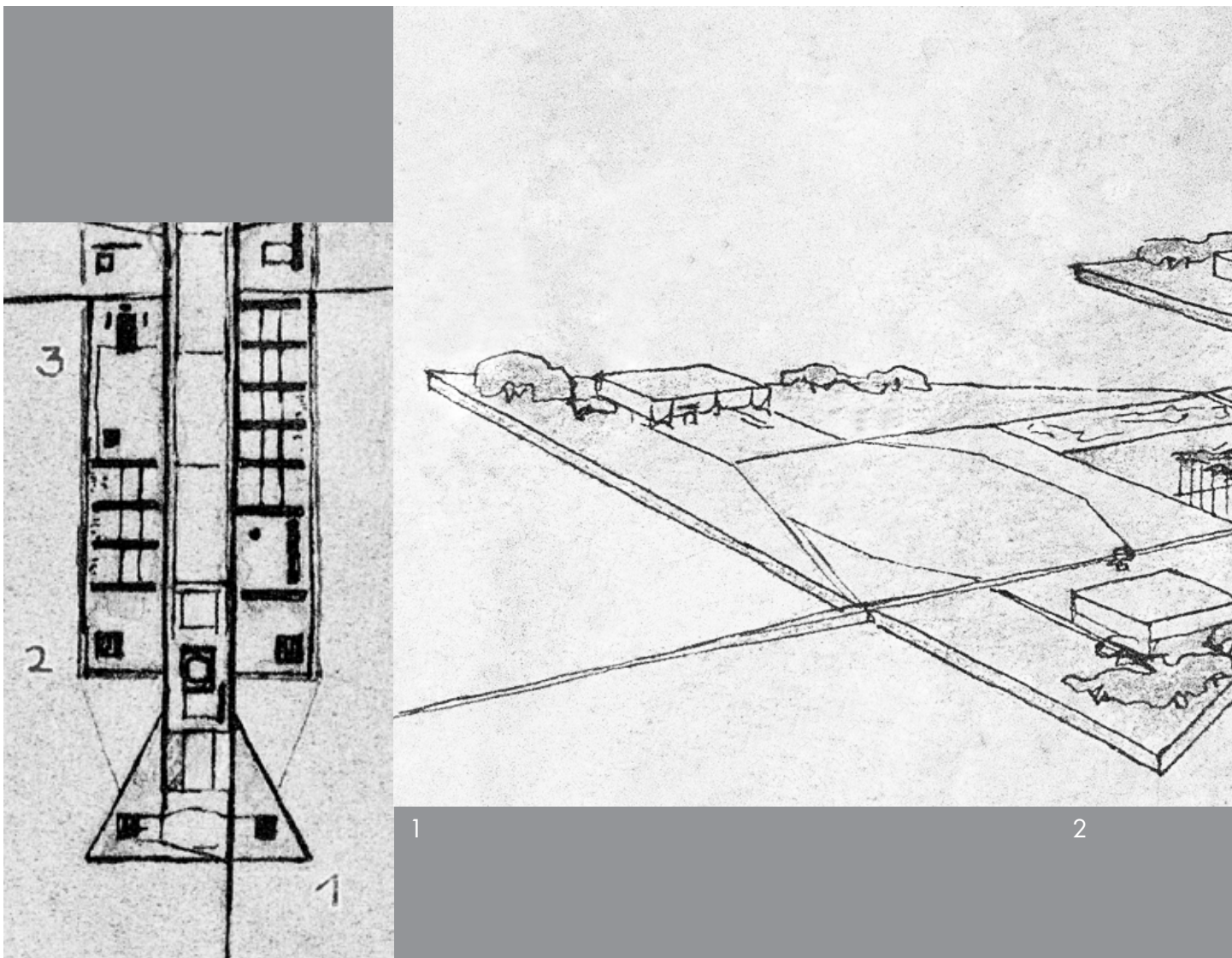
and Senate domes would fit in the platform, keeping the horizontal proportion necessary as a counterpoint for the two towers and holding visual space for the two domes. Costa, however, decided to keep the total width of the Esplanade Plateau (600 meters).

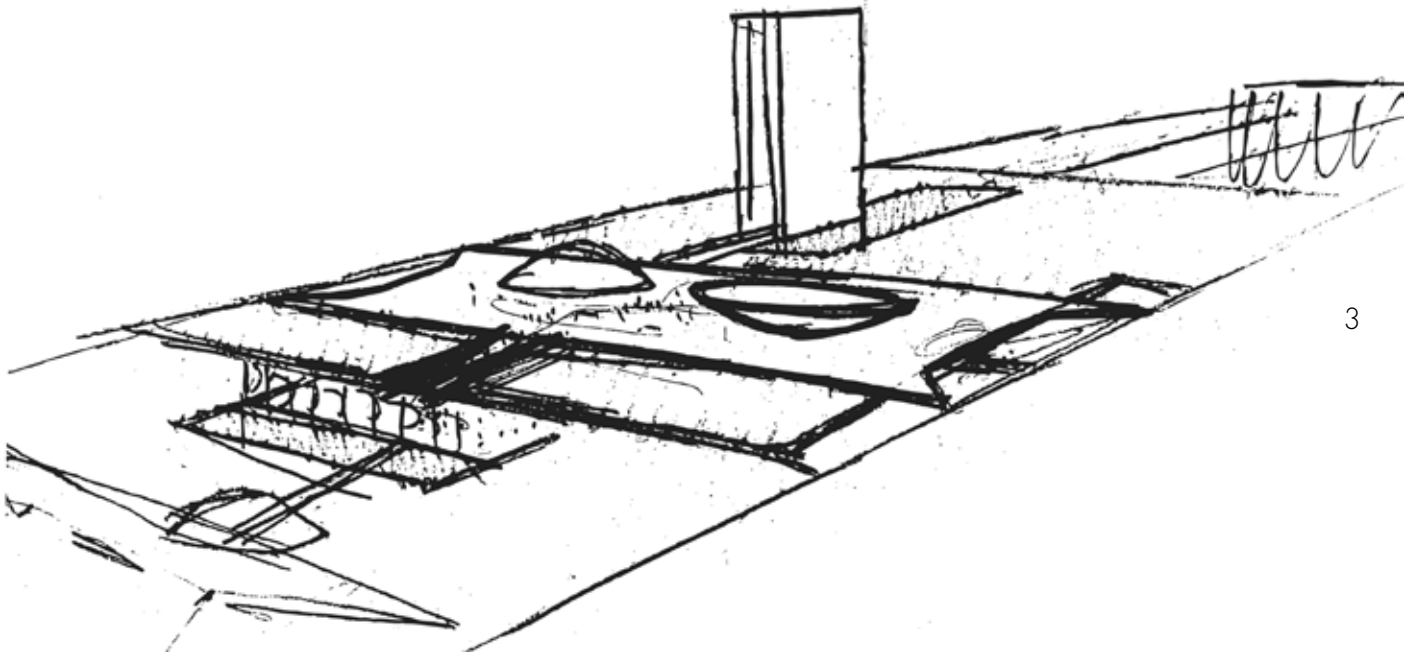
As the platform was placed on the Esplanade level—so that the domes would look as if standing on the ground-level—an earthwork problem came out. The base was kept open towards the west side, unveiling the façade of a horizontal slab at short distance. This generated not only a horizontal area of almost 75 meters in front of the building, on the level of the plaza behind, but also a 175 meter-long slope on the central lawn of the mall: summing up 250 meters to reach the upper level. Another consequence of this strategy was a 75 meter displacement of the Plaza to the east, so that the equilateral triangle could fit the central mall aligned with the corners of the platform.

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].

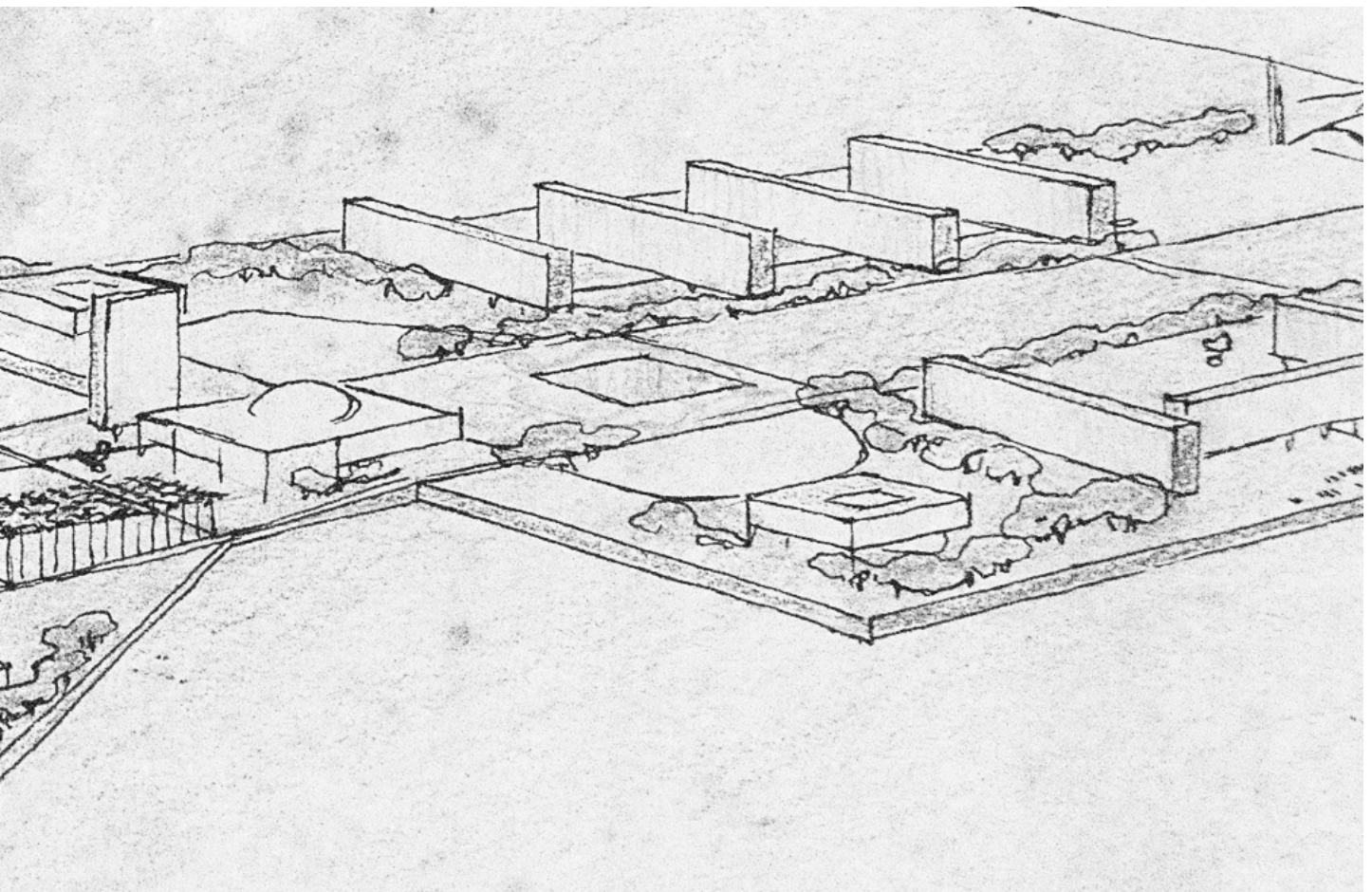
The Congress after the plan

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.





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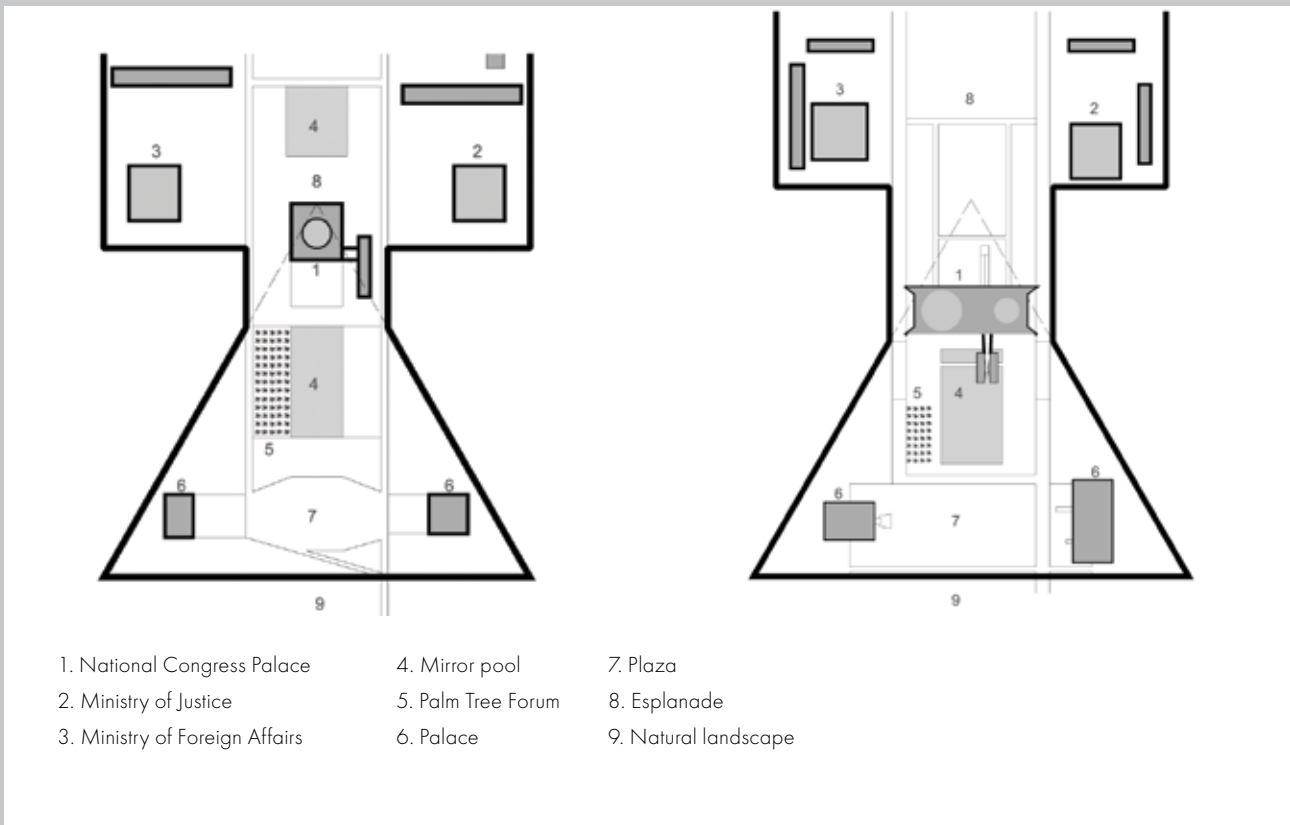


63

Figure 1. Pilot Plan of Brasilia. **Lúcio Costa** sketches. Esplanade and Plaza of Three Powers. Casa Lúcio Costa

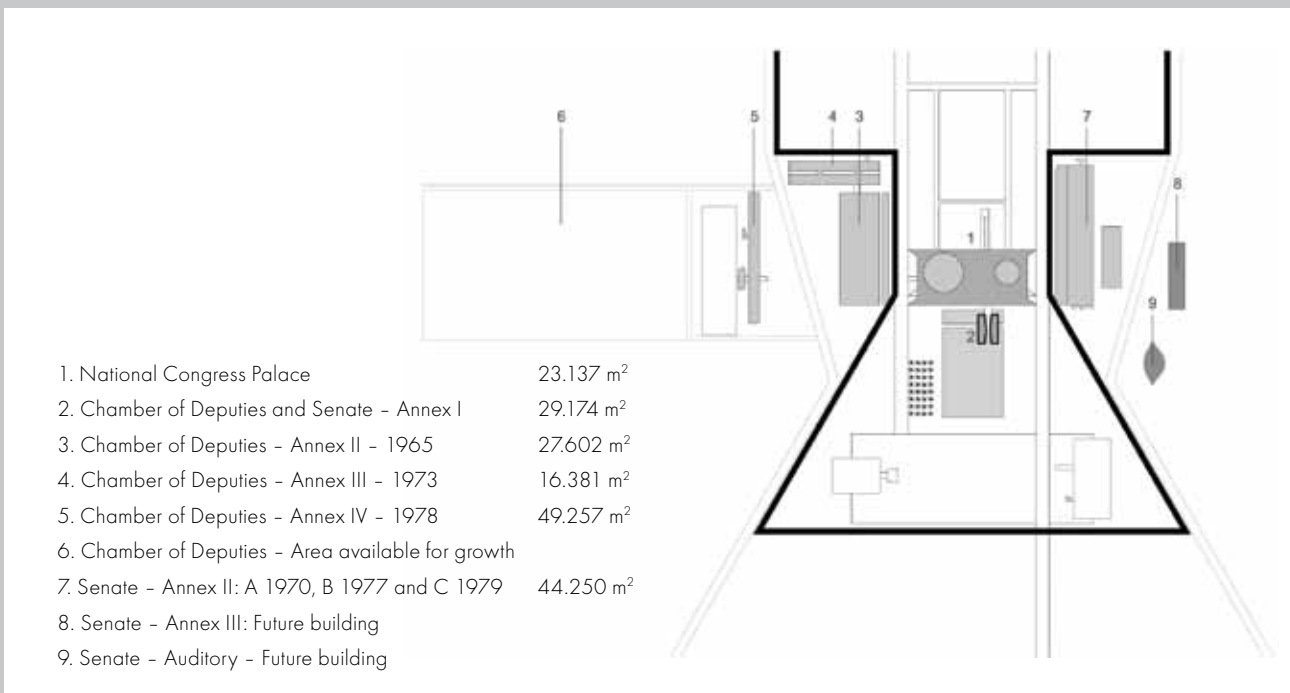
Figure 2. Plaza of Three Powers. **Lúcio Costa** sketches. Competition preliminary studies. Casa Lúcio Costa

Figure 3. Palace of Congress. **Oscar Niemeyer** study with domes over. Personal collection, Matheus Gorovitz



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64



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Figure 4. Plaza of Three Powers.

Lucio Costa and **Oscar Niemeyer**, 1957

Left: **Lucio Costa**, March 1957

Right: **Oscar Niemeyer**, July 1957 Computer-aided design from originals and sketches.

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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 Brasília 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].⁷

Before Brasília 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.

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
3. Cf. Costa, 1995
4. See Costa, Lima, e Costa, 1985, 27. See also: Leitão, 2003, 95
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

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Danilo Matoso Macedo

Architect and Urban Designer, graduated at Federal University of Minas Gerais (Belo Horizonte, Brazil) in 1997. Master Degree from the same institution in 2002, Specialist in Public Policies and Government Management from National School of Public Administration in 2004. Professional in design practice since 1997, being awarded in many architectural competitions. He also works as an architect in the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, in Brasília, since 2004. He is the author of a book on Oscar Niemeyer's works in Minas Gerais, published in 2008. As an editor, he published a compilation of texts by the Brazilian engineer Joaquim Cardozo, and he publishes MDC Architectural Magazine <www.mdc.arq.br>. Danilo founded the **docomomo** Chapter Brasília in August 2007, which he directs up to date.

Elcio Gomes da Silva

Architect and Urban Designer graduated at University of Brasília (Belo Horizonte, Brazil) in 1995, where he is currently a PhD student. Professional in design practice since 1996, he has participated in many architectural competitions. He also works as an architect in the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, in Brasília, since 2002.