



What Happened to Brasilia:

Holston's Critique of the Modernist Project¹

In 1956, the government of Brazil, seeking to expand its global economic influence and increase urbanization in central parts of the country, moved the nation's capital from southeastern, coastal Rio de Janeiro to sparsely-populated region in central Brazil. The government hoped that by building a modern city in this area, they would encourage population growth and transform the region's international reputation to one hospitable to business and industry. A city plan was developed by Lucio Costa and architect, Oscar Niemeyer after a competition held by the government. By 1960, in a mere four years, the monumental city was completed and Brasilia became Brazil's official new capital.

James Holston's cultural critique of the modernist plan for Brasilia reveals the new city as a utopian project seeking to re-structure society through transformation of the built environment. Although for many years popular sentiment held central Brazil as barely inhabited, the plan for Brasilia reflected an effort to change common assumptions and to resurrect Brazil's underdevelopment by bringing industry, commerce and western culture into the underdeveloped central regions of the country. Under the supposition that a complete reorganization of the built environment would directly incite social transformation, Brasilia's planners and architects envisioned a modernist city to embody the ideals they wanted for Brazil and its new capital.

The plan organized Brasilia's residences into superquadra, or superblocks of apartment buildings, unified in structure, form, size and appearance. These residences would simultaneously house low and high-income residents, reflecting egalitarian and democratic values. It was imagined that, by sharing living quarters, members of society from different backgrounds would inherently begin living in harmonious social existence with one another; that

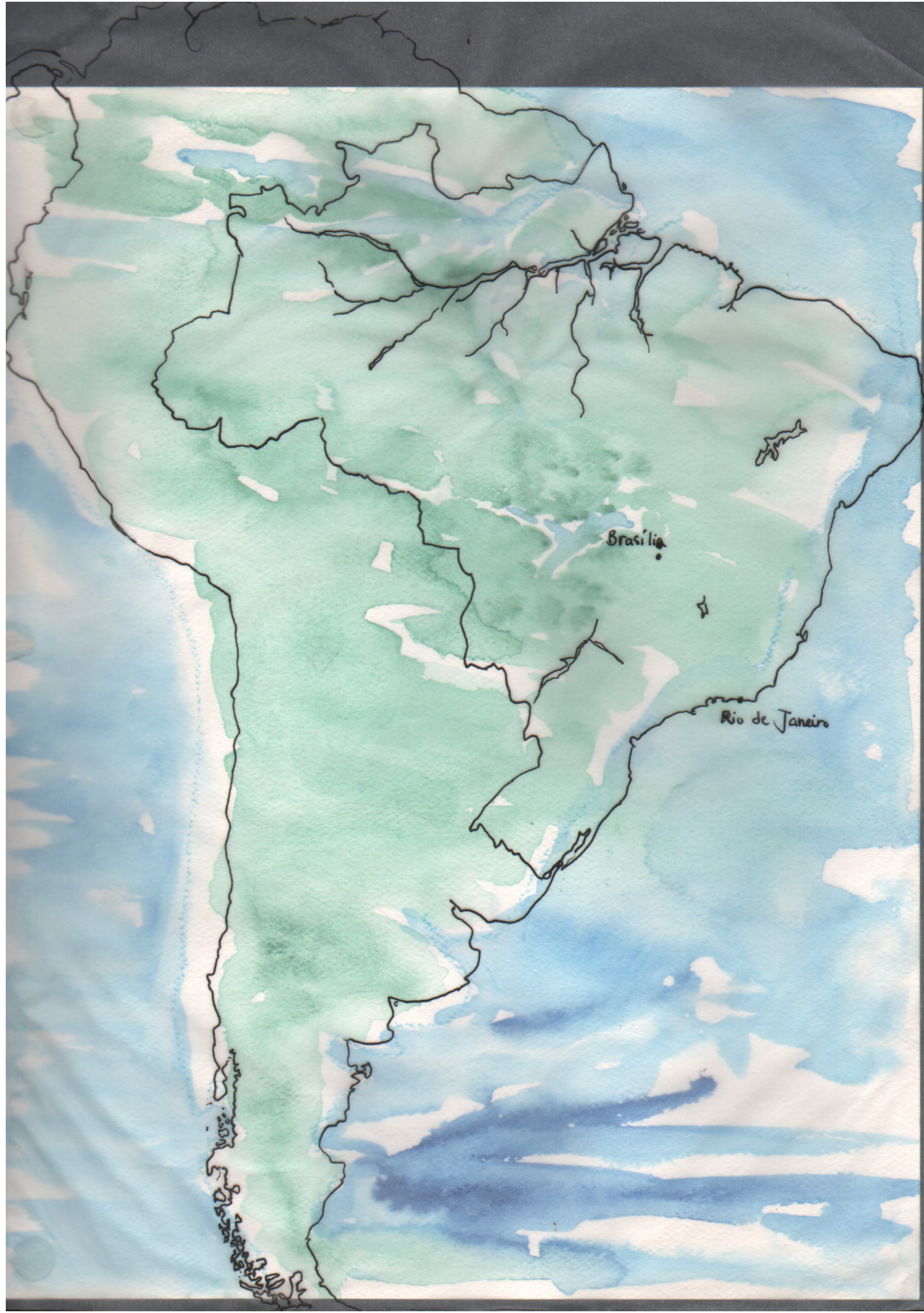
their undifferentiated residences would influence Brasilienses to put aside their class and racial differences.

The city would be divided into homogenous zones of activity, as seen in typical urban planning ideology, whereby residences and workplaces would be kept concentrated into distinct zones. These zones would connect to each other through a simplified traffic circulation system consisting of one, city-wide axis which would streamline and make efficient the commute from residential to work zones. The monumental axis highway would bisect Brasilia from north to south, and the residential highway would intersect this highway, going east to west. This system separated automobiles and pedestrians, allowing cars to move swiftly on highways without need for stopping at traffic lights. The plan demonstrates a desire to completely eliminate traditional city streets along with interaction between automobiles and pedestrians. This new transportation system, however, would also do away with human-scale street corners and the rich, public life of streets; a disorienting and unwelcome fact for many new Brazilian residents.



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Brasilia became intensely populated in a short amount of time and, over the years, has come to resemble - in its traffic jams during peak hours and shortage of parking spaces - many busy metropolitan regions of the United States. Similarly, the regions surrounding the city quickly developed







as suburban towns. However, despite the high demand and population growth it received, Brasilia was not unequivocally accepted and appreciated by its new citizens. The Brasilienses felt the homogenization of residences produced anonymity, not equality. The plan's attempt to mix all social classes ignited conflict among people with different values, as it did not take into account the reality of their differences. Furthermore, they rejected the uniformity of the superquadra and the complete absence of public, street life that is essential to other Brazilian cities. By separating the city into distinct zones of activity - work, residence, recreation, and traffic - the plan "produced organizational clarity" however, the public's use of urban space was also reduced "to a commuter shuttle between work and residence" (24). Thus, the modernist plan re-created the problems of many other planned cities and sprawling landscapes - sacrificing human, social elements for a theoretical, planning order.

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Brasilia's plan reflects the ideal of constructed order common in modern planning systems. It does this in the system of traffic circulation that would do away with complex multiple blocks to adopt a single, heavily-trafficked super-highway; in the city's zoning by exclusive, homogenous regions of activity; in the residential superquadra, so unified and simplistic in structure. Ultimately, Brasilia's plan is an example of a utopian, modernist enterprise which proposes an instrumental relation between architecture and society; by living in the superquadra, people will naturally behave like true modernists and adopt democratic ideals. This supposed link between architecture and society, however, is not explicit in Brasilia's plan. Intentions are disguised, decontextualized, de-historicized in relation to the rest of Brazil and to the planners' own backgrounds in the styles and paradigms of modernism. A significant oversight by the planners and architects of Brasilia was their implicit belief that the modernist plan would bring positive, effective development no matter the context in which it was

placed. Brasilia was conceived of by professionals from an academic culture of modernism but "it was necessarily built and inhabited... by the rest of Brazil the former denied" (23). The planners, unaware of the culture they themselves came from, functioned under the paradigm of universal design principles.

For example, they failed to ask an extremely simple but telling question: Why *should* Brasilia's plan propose architecture so radically different from other Brazilian cities, especially as there is not explicit explanation in the plan for this fact? The modernist enterprise fails to contextualize itself - its paradigms, imagined ideals, and value systems - and in this lack of self-understanding, it colonizes cultures around it under the guise of universal design principles that can benefit all. The modernist city is one which can be built *anywhere*, regardless of history, context, culture. This ideology "eliminates the tensions, specificities, and diversities" (57) of its own solutions while providing a one-size-fits-all fix for both social and environmental ills.

Brasilia is a lesson for our future, an awakening to the culture that permeates modernist understandings of 'good' built environments. It is in the nature of academic culture to develop totalizing theories that provide solutions for many social, economic and environmental issues. However helpful these theories may be, we must take care to evaluate each and every situation uniquely and consider the specific people, cultures and histories involved in each project. An ultimately effective attempt at building positive environments will necessarily include a continual dialogue, questioning and re-evaluating proposed plans. Nature does not stand still, people change, needs are continually shifting. Theory and planning must be flexible enough to move and sway with the wind.

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<sup>1</sup> Holston, James. *The Modernist City: an Anthropological Critique of Brasilia*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989. Print. All page references are from this source.

<sup>2</sup> Amorim, Claudia N., and Alice Flores. *Superquadra*. 2005. Photograph. 22nd Conference on Passive and Low Energy Architecture, Brasilia. *Modern Residential Buildings in Brasilia*. Web. <<http://vsites.unb.br/fau/qualilumi/artigos/PA076.pdf>>.