

The legacy of modern urbanism in Brazil

Paradigm turned reality or unfinished project?

The Modern Movement ideals of transformation and progress coincided with the national spirit and *zeitgeist* of the 1930s *Estado Novo* in Brazil. Despite a persistent conflict between distinct urbanist views a progressive approach of urbanism became eventually predominant. Its strong impact on urbanist manifestations reached its climax with the construction of Brasília.

This paper explores some negative aspects of the modern legacy in Brazilian urbanism, but by acknowledging that Modern Movement ideals helped to establish a great sense of social consciousness and promoted a common aim, also the creation of a particular identity is recognized. By strengthening local elements of identity the perverse aspects of contemporary globalized culture may effectively be attenuated; an excellent reason why we must not neglect our modern legacy.

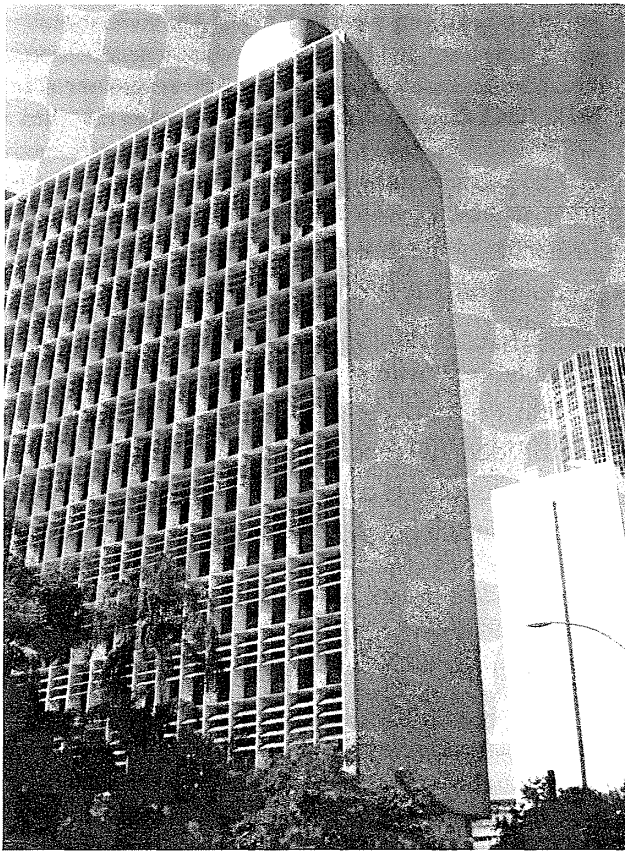
by Vicente del Rio and Haroldo Gallo

Certainly in Brazil, more than in many other countries, the Modern Movement in architecture and urbanism has been emblematic and left a significant legacy. Modern constructive and plastic expressions already marked the Brazilian panorama in the 1920s, when the ideological foundations of the movement emerged and it started to be structured around the European experiences of the inter-war period. But it was

only during the *Estado Novo* in the 1930s that the Brazilian Modern Movement would gain body and consistency, turning into a national cultural paradigm, and starting to gather volume and density until its climax with the construction of Brasília.¹ Such a strong paradigm that, even if never fully realized, served generations of young architects, and its signs are still clear in every Brazilian city.²



Placeless landscape resulting from an urban renewal plan by Affonso Reidy for the Esplanada de Santo Antonio, center of Rio de Janeiro. The area resulted from the demolishment of a historical and populated hill but the plan was too grandiose and detached from reality to ever be completed. Photo: V. del Rio.

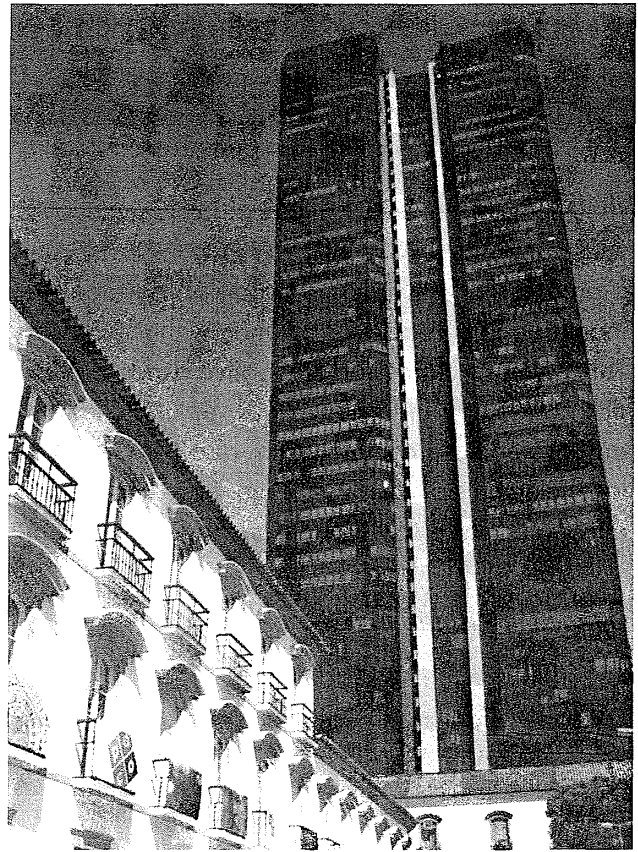


The creators of the Ministry of Education building, perhaps the most important single Modern Movement project in Brazil, argued that it should stand alone in the block, a guideline that was to be disrespected by Oscar Niemeyer himself when hired to design the commercial tower with the blank wall on the background of this photograph. Photo: V. del Rio.

Urban models

As in the European countries, the international ideology of the Modern Movement was also overtly embraced in Brazil because it longed to form a more egalitarian society, to replace the worn-out classicist and historicist aesthetics for a new machine-like one, to industrialize the cities and to strengthen a new working class – political ballast of the *Estado Novo* – and to transform the country from a rural into an urban economy. In a few words, these ideals of transformation and progress coincided with the Brazilian national spirit and *zeitgeist* – like in the positivist motto *order and progress* written in the national flag – and would eventually and inevitably reflect on urbanist manifestations. However, if compared to pure architectural expressions where the modernist models were already dominant, in Brazilian urbanism of the 1930s and 1940s a conflict persisted between distinct urban design models, largely between the 'culturalist' and the 'progressist' models – if we are to use Françoise Choay's typology. Soon, the latter would become predominant whilst finding in Lúcio Costa its major representative.³

An interesting example of the ideological conflict between urban models in Brazil was the hiring of Italian architect Marcello Piacentini – best known for his connections with fascism and Mussolini – in 1935 by the Minister of Education – who would later hire Lúcio Costa's team and Le Corbusier for the design of the world famous new building for the



The favourable vote for the construction of this black-glazed giant tower black that disrupted the historical surroundings and sight lines of Praça XV in Rio de Janeiro, was one of Lúcio Costa's most polemic decisions as the director of the IPHAN heritage institute. Photo: V. del Rio.

Ministry of Education in Rio. Piacentini had previously designed the University of Rome and was to develop the masterplan for a new public university campus in Rio de Janeiro. Although Costa opposed Piacentini's design, and together with Corbu came up with an alternative plan in 1937, the university commission rejected it in favour of Piacentini's, which was only to be dropped with the advent of World War II.

Throughout the 1930s, 'culturalist' urban models were widely utilized in Brazil such as, for example, in the various plans and projects by French urbanist Alfred Agache⁴, in the work of Atílio Correia Lima, such as in his 1933 master plan for the city of Goiânia, in city beautification projects, such as Mayor Prestes Maia's 'avenues plan' for São Paulo, in German and Italian colony and company-towns in Paraná and São Paulo, and in garden-city inspired design of land developments, such as those by The City of São Paulo Improvements and Freehold Company – who even hired Unwin and Parker for their first Brazilian projects – and in Jardim Oceânico, the expansion of the urban frontier at Barra da Tijuca, Rio de Janeiro, in the early 1940s.

Hegemony

Most of these 'culturalist' urban projects, particularly the so-called residential garden neighbourhoods, originally designed for the higher income groups, are low density; houses lay amidst heavily landscaped areas, and streets are

sinuous, bucolic and adapted to topography. Understandably, most of them are now in high demand in the market, and some have acquired a higher status through protective legislation such as special design guidelines. No doubt that, in the case of Brazil, only after being encompassed by the State into its nationalist discourse, the 'progressist' model for modern town planning was to become predominant, unavoidably reflecting in day-to-day urban design. From important but scattered small-scale urban projects, the new model came to dominate the vast majority of institutional design agencies at every level of government – and most importantly in public housing and city redevelopment – through the hands of a young generation of architects, until reaching its peak of expression through the competition and design for the new capital Brasília in the late 1950s.

The construction of a newly planned city to move the capital from coastal Rio de Janeiro to a then wild inner territory was a unique experience among the scant international urban references. The plan became a fact within only a few years, representing an urban model that was at the same time national and international, quickly becoming a world reference and an icon of the cultural maturity of Brazilian architecture and urbanism.

Banalized concepts

On the one hand, the easiness to implement such an urban model in Brazil may be explained in the larger context by the construction of a new State and a new nation, with an identity of its own but at the same time internationalized. On the other hand, it represented a step that was anxiously expected by the Brazilian cultural elite because it gave body to a positivist and rational way of thinking, which origins may be traced back to the Renaissance and to Descartes. For them a problem should be encountered by subdividing it and addressing it by parts, from the simplest to the more complex. This is also the principle contained in the *tabula rasa*, a concept so dear to Corbusian thought and to Brazilian modern architecture and urbanism. One denies the authority of the past and substitutes it by one's own experience, in the light of reason and despising the legacy of history, over which modernism rules by negation, in a city that is safely zoned and physically healthy to function perfectly: to live and work, to circulate and cultivate the body and the spirit.

Therefore, it was not by chance that the modern project found fertile ground to expand in the 1950s and 1960s in Brazil. Because of its compatibility with the national development and housing policies it continued to serve as a model that was deeply inserted in every cultural level and type of expression. From then on, beyond the experience of Brasília but certainly because of its emblematic dimension and its gestural type of statement – which led to the trademark of our modernist generation: the abuse of the pencil stroke as the only method to solve spatial problems – there is also an obscure and less talked-about side to the legacy of Brazilian modern urbanism.

Modernist ideology infiltrated in the daily routine of Brazilian cities not only through the modernist architects acting in the private and public sectors, but also through the explicit

ideologies of important institutional agents, such as the National Housing Bank (BNH; that financed urban development and public housing), the Federal Agency for Housing and Urbanism (SERFHAU; that promoted master planning and urban redevelopment), and the local Housing Companies (COHAB; that built public housing), as well as through land use, subdivision and zoning laws, master planning and urban renewal projects, building codes, and so on. The modernist model was particularly successful because it could also easily serve to the interests of capital and profit, either because of its 'simplicity' or of the extreme densities that it promoted through the concept of the 'towers in the green', moreover when the model was bastardized by land speculation and banalized by simplistic urban regulations. The large majority of these results are not even faint comparisons to the quality existing in the legacy of Brazilian Modern Movement architecture, particularly that of the so-called heroic period that today is re-valued as the object of a fresh new set of research and discussions, particularly in Brazil. They constitute, on the contrary, good examples of how the unrestricted and thoughtless adoption of modern urban precepts can be harmful even if by the hands of our own heroes.

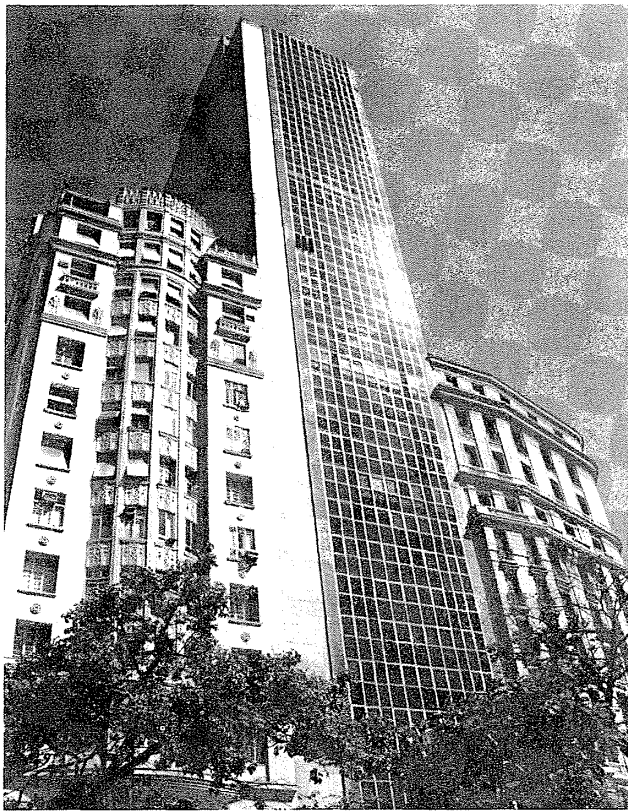
Institutionalization

A widely met effect of the legacy of this urbanism, that permeated the daily life in all cities, is the range of restrictive disposals and classifications in the zoning laws. As these are aimed at the protection of urban functions from the impact of one another, zoning derives from a rupture in the vision of the city as a *continuum* – physical, social and historical – and it tries to promote a fractured approach that does not recognize the richness of urban complexity, and tries to deal with the city through compartmented sectors that are more easily manageable.

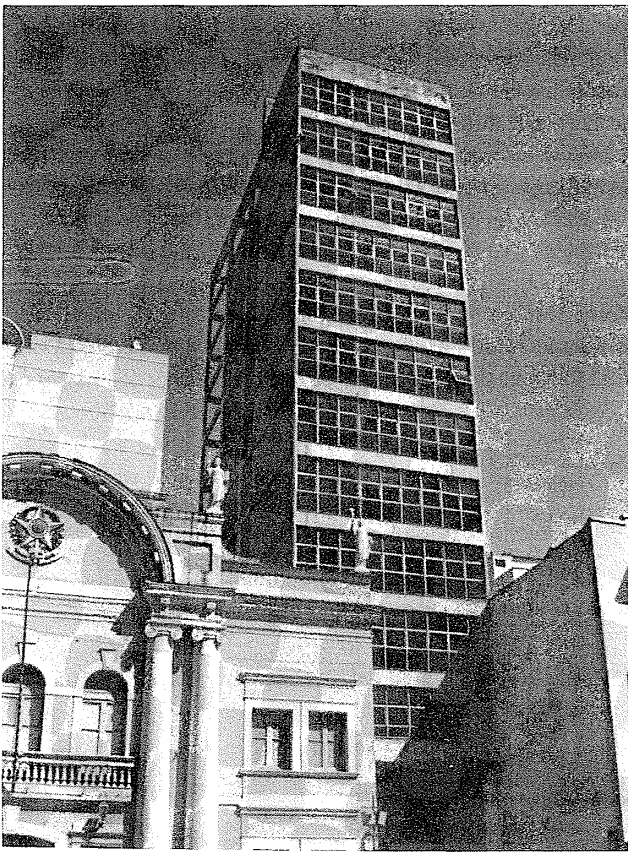
In the large cities of Brazil, as in most large cities elsewhere, it was mainly through zoning that the modernist vision promoted monofunctionalism and deflated the urban centres, generating particularly perverse impacts in the historical cores of larger cities, empty areas that lost their residents, are insecure and left to marginality, and suffer from



Wide, dangerous and uncomfortable 'no-man's land' for the users instead of 'green and free' areas at the University of São Paulo campus, a typical example of State-promoted modern urbanism. Photo: H. Gallo.



Unpersonal curtain-walled architecture with a 100% land coverage in Cinelândia, downtown Rio de Janeiro; a common example of disrespect to the environment, the surroundings and the urban tissue. Photo: V. del Rio.



Typical leftover from the urban legislation that predicted a progressive enlargement of the street's rights-of-way for the implementation of an ambitious and modernist street system at Lapa, Rio de Janeiro. Photo: V. del Rio.

degrading processes that are extremely difficult to reverse. Paradoxically, these areas are well infrastructured, have easy access from all parts of the city, and in most cases are loaded with strong meanings for their communities. Complementary to zoning, the urbanist directives, descriptive mandates and other ways of regulating the intention and form of urban development, in the case of the large majority of Brazilian cities, end up institutionalizing certain building types or architectural models against others, that are out of tune with the repertoire of the supervising architects or of land developers, and sometimes even against cultural and social traditions. Thus, the large free or green areas of modern urbanism turn into uncomfortable and dangerous emptiness, while impersonal commercial tower blocks with curtain wall facades tragically disrupt the old urban tissue. New setbacks generate discontinuities and no-man's land that is both useless and dangerous. The same model of free-standing residential towers on top of a multi-storey garage-base with 100% land coverage is used as a stamp in every single city district, and the dichotomy between the public and the private realms is encouraged through the exclusion of the semi-public and the annihilation of all scales of transition.

Walled communities

In Brazilian cities, zoning and urban regulations - fundamentally a modernist legacy - guarantee, in a perverse way, that developers do not run the risk of having their investment threatened by a new and undesired neighbour. Besides, together with wider investment policies such as in infrastructure and road construction, these development incentives assure new centralities, gentrify urban areas and expel to less equipped areas - like the urban periphery or *favelas* on the hills - the lower-income groups that are unable to adapt to the official urban and architectural typology. More recently, this exhausted model of modernism survives in Brazilian cities through the expansion or the development of new urban fringes. On the one hand, post-modernized and bastardized, as in the case of Barra da Tijuca in Rio de Janeiro, where Lúcio Costa's *Plano Piloto*⁵ has, in essence, facilitated a progressive transformation of the area into a locus for all possible kinds of malls and shopping centers, walled communities in the style of Williams Island in Miami, theme parks and other experiments of globalized capitalism.⁶ On the other side, by assuming a character that is discontinuous, exogenous and excentric to the urban environment where it is inserted.

Lessons

But if in this article we exposed rather briefly and generically some negative aspects in the legacy of Brazilian modern urbanism, the current revision of modernism - which is also present in Brazil - minimizes the possibilities of them being repeated. At the same time it points out models and solutions that are much more responsive to the needs of the users and to the natural and built environment where new inserts may be required. Above all, we need to admit and to point out a strong facet in its positive character: Modern Movement ideals helped to establish among us a great sense of social consciousness and advanced a unity in purposes, which allowed the creation of an expression of identity - a true



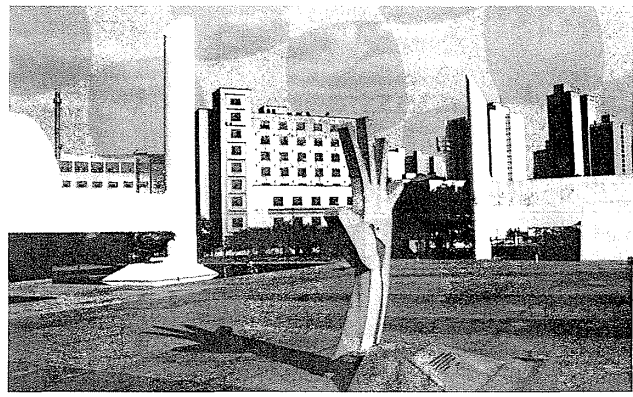
Landscape at Barra da Tijuca, Rio de Janeiro, with a wall resulting from the 'towers in the green' concept, each one in his own walled and gated parcel, behind a commercial strip and the express way, where the large distances make it almost impossible for the pedestrian to perceive anything. Photo: V. del Rio.

paradox with the precept of negation of the historical repertoire for the creation of new forms.

Arguably, this debt to the legacy of our major urbanist, the architect Lúcio Costa, is perhaps the most fecund source for current urbanism in Brazil. Firstly, because he moved easily between the scale of the building and that of the city – what certainly was a rupture with the Portuguese tradition and evidently conducted to a clear unitarian position in Brazilian architectural education, unlike many countries. Secondly, his lifetime devotion to historical preservation through his publications and his professional work at IPHAN – the National Institute for Historical and Artistic Patrimony. These aspects of Costa's personality extended to several generations of architects that, if they did not incorporate the formal and technological repertoire from the past, they knew how to find lessons of architectural and spatial composition most adequate to our particular way of life, and how to incorporate these lessons into their typological, formal and technical repertoire.

Thus, both Brazilian architecture and urbanism could generate an identity that, although referring to international ideals, was idiosyncratic for the Brazilian case and expressed safe and collective values, unlike the post-modern culture that, with its dispersion and diversity of points of view, generates a constant crises of values and identity. Most probably, it is by establishing and strengthening local elements of identity that we may effectively attenuate the perverse aspects of contemporary globalized culture, an excellent reason why we must not neglect our modern legacy but pursue what is most fecund in our unfinished modern project.

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Recently designed by Oscar Niemeyer, the Latin American Memorial is a handful of elegant sculptural pieces of architecture that relate poorly to one another and generates empty and uncomfortable areas, besides negating the surrounding city. Photo: H. Gallo.

Notes

1. The 'Estado Novo' – which literally means New State – was born as a military coup d'etat led by the national populist leader Getulio Vargas in 1930 who, promising to modernize and industrialize the country, gathered strong political foothold in the newly formed urban proletariat and stayed in presidency until 1945. During that period, the regime compromised with capitalist, socialist and even fascist ideological ingredients toward its own national political project. See: Skidmore, Thomas, *Politics in Brazil, 1930-1964: An Experiment in Democracy*, Oxford University Press, London 1967.
2. For an excellent recent historical account of Brazilian architecture see: Segawa, Hugo, *Arquiteturas no Brasil, 1900-1990*, EDUSP, São Paulo 1998.
3. A wide account on the evolution of Brazilian urbanism may be found in: Leme, Maria Cristina Dias (org), *Urbanismo no Brasil: 1895-1965*, Studio Nobel / FUPAM, São Paulo 1999.
4. With very strong connections to the English garden-city movement, Alfred Agache was one of the leaders in the foundation of urbanism as a profession in France and had a busy practice – he came second in the competition for the design of Canberra and was responsible for one of the first efforts in regional and coastal town planning for tourism in Portugal. From 1926 to 1930 he developed a careful masterplan for Rio de Janeiro, where beautification, urban design and structural physical planning combined with a substantial preoccupation in sanitation, vehicular circulation, public housing and satellite towns. After this, he lived and worked in Rio until 1959.
5. Following the success of Brasília, in the mid 1960s Lúcio Costa was hired by the city of Rio de Janeiro for a conceptual plan for Barra da Tijuca, a large and mostly virgin territory to the south of the city that was to receive urban expansion. His modernist plan followed the principles of a tree-like freeway system that define groups of free-standing towers in green areas interposed with groups of low-rise housing, very strict zoning and a strong desire to protect large portions of the natural landscape, the beaches and lakes.
6. Del Rio, V., and Santos, A.C., 'A Outra Urbanidade: A Construção da Cidade Pós-Moderna e o Caso da Barra da Tijuca', in Del Rio, V. (org), *Arquitetura: Pesquisa & Projeto*, Pro-Editores & PROARQ-FAU/UFRJ, São Paulo 1998.