Brasilia or the Limits of Theory
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Modernist planning theory assumed that planning, architecture, and urban design by themselves could transform society and create new forms of collective association and personal habits. Using James Holston's The Modernist City, an Anthropological Critique of Brasilia as my starting point, I argue in this paper that Brasilia clearly exemplifies the limits of planning theory itself. Even if it provided Brasilia's planners with a specific and explicit set of guidelines, concepts, and principles, these ended up creating a "formalistic shell for living" that did not transform the status quo but made it even more explicit. As such, Brasilia reminds us that the development of cities is mostly the consequence of personal decisions and choices that cannot be determined a priori. Therefore, planning theory can only help planners, architects, urban designers and politicians (to name a few) "create conditions that might set in motion processes" (Abu-Lughod 1993:32), but it can nonetheless never provide us with totalizing solutions that always objectify and consider people passive recipients of planning and thus fail to include the unintended, the unexpected, the subversive, the political.

We consistently use theoretical frameworks to inform our understanding of cities and urban processes. However, it is always people who make decisions and thereby define the nature and development of cities. Yet, people have biases, identities, and particular interests that are part of both the way they experience cities and the vision they have of what the city ought to be. Therefore, cities are contested spaces and urban processes the result of amorphous, tacit, and ongoing negotiations. Nevertheless, access to the "negotiation table" (the city itself), where the "fate" of the city is decided, is not equally distributed among city dwellers. Inevitably, it seems, some residents have a greater ability or, perhaps most importantly, better possibilities to influence decisions because of their social status, economic or political power, or the amount of resources they command. It indeed seems, as George Orwell put it not so long ago, that all people are equal but that some are more equal than others.

Modernist planning theory tried to change this. It assumed that planning, architecture, and urban design by themselves could transform society and create new forms of collective association and personal habits. Furthermore, modernist planning theory assumed that if the correct set of ideas (a theory) was implemented, people could get rid of their biases and particular interests in favor of a collective, classless and egalitarian society and "a new order of urban life" (Holston 1998, 41). As Holston (1989) shows in his book *The Modernist City, an Anthropological Critique of Brasilia,* this theory was implemented to its furthest extent in Brasilia—the new Brazilian capital planned, designed, and built in the 1950s.

Holston's book is a study of Brasilia from multiple but intertwined perspectives. In the first part of the book, *The*
Myth of the Concrete, Holston traces the origin of Brasilia—the reasons, both overt and hidden, behind the decision to build a new capital. Moreover, he explains the planning and architectural modernist principles used in the layout and design of the city, and the way the Brazilian government justified its construction.

In the second part of the book, *The City Defamiliarized*, Holston analyzes how Brasilia, and modernist planning in general, tries to make the city "strange" in order to achieve the transformation of society. Moreover, by neglecting the street and blurring the distinction between public and private space, modernist planning attempts to impose a new urban order and negate the usual expectations about urban life. Finally, in the third part of the book, *The Recovery of History*, Holston traces the process by which Brasilia ended up contradicting its own premises, those of a new, classless and egalitarian society, by granting specific rights within the city to particular social groups and thereby neglecting to grant the same rights to others. Furthermore, he describes how Brasilienses, as the people from Brasilia are called, have, to a certain degree, "Brazilianized" Brasilia, thus neglecting the proposed new urban life and the restructuring of Brazilian society. Holston concludes that modernist theory, as carried out in Brasilia, not only failed to solve or avoid the problems it intended to solve but even made them more explicit and acute.

Brasilia and Modernist Theory

The chosen site for Brasilia did not, as location theory could suggest, respond to economic reasons and was thus not located in the middle of Brazil in order to minimize costs of production or transportation. Instead, Brasilia was built

in the middle of Brazil, mostly for symbolic reasons, as the symbol of a new and modern Brazil that, supposedly, would include all Brazilians. Additionally, its design and construction were intended as the means to create a new era of national development and economic growth. As Holston (1989) states, "Brasilia was to be the cause, not the result, of economic development" (83).

Brasilia embodies many of the premises of modernist architecture, especially those of the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM by its French acronym) and its most vociferous and known advocate, the Swiss/French architect Le Corbusier. Le Corbusier was extremely influenced by the mechanical and technological revolution of the assembly line. Fordism, taylorism, scientific management, and the link between technology and social change were essential to his view of social regeneration expressed in his architecture and urban projects (McLeod 1983). Moreover, he believed that the city, if it was to survive, had to become the "ultimate machine," *i.e.* an efficient, mechanized and standardized city with a central authority "capable of coordinating all the phases of design and production" (Fishman 1977, 189).

In his 1933 proposal, *La Ville Radieuse* (the Radiant City), Le Corbusier organized the city along two main transportation axes or superhighways designed especially for the automobile, separated functions into mutually exclusive sectors, and included egalitarian high-rise apartments set in vast, green, open spaces—*superblocks or superquadras*, as they are called in Brasilia—where workers were to live according to their needs and not to their social position. These principles, Le Corbusier believed, would make possible a new social structure: abolish the separation between (decayed) peripheries and (prosperous) central cities, incorporate all classes, and distribute urban benefits among all residents (Fishman 1977, Le Corbusier 1987).

Lucio Costa adopted this Le Corbusian model in his winning Master Plan for Brasilia. Costa organized the Plano Piloto, as the city itself is usually called, along two transportation axes or superhighways devoted to motorized transportation. Likewise, he separated diverse functions into mutually exclusive sectors: government buildings, offices, recreational services, and main commercial areas along the Monumental Axe; and apartment blocks and some commercial areas along the Residential Axe. Moreover, the government gave all future Brasilia inhabitants, regardless of social status or class, an apartment in the superquadras.

In sum, Brasilia was planned according to a defined and explicit set of ideas set forth by modernist planning theory, and its Master Plan aimed to create the foundations of an egalitarian urban organization. The plan, however, failed miserably.

From Collective Use-values to Privatized Exchange-values

The modernist planning theory that inspired Brasilia's design attributed the urban and social crisis to both the dominance of private interests in the development of cities and the accumulation of wealth. As Logan and Molotch (1987) argue, the city is in great part a result of the conflict between the interests of rentiers, landowners and other place entrepreneurs (the "growth machine") seeking to maximize exchange values, and that of residents seeking to increase use values. Brasilia's planner and the Brazilian government aimed to avoid this conflict by retaining ownership of all land and most of the buildings, including the apartments. Furthermore, they tried to enhance use values through the state-sponsored provision of several services and amenities: childcare, resource centers, space for communal activities, and vast amounts of open green space. However, the characteristics Logan and Molotch (1987) identify as the basis of residents' use values were not present in Brasilia. Its "neighborhoods," the *superquadra*, did not become the place where daily needs were satisfied nor were they the source of informal networks. Moreover, since all apartments and *superquadras* were strikingly similar, the Brasilian neighborhood did not become a source of identity. Instead of forging collective associations, Brasilia's *superquadras* isolated and standardized residents.

By the end on the 1960s, the Brazilian state, under the pressure of the city's elite, finally sold the apartments, and a real estate market developed. In a matter of years, market forces marginalized lower-income and poor residents who were not able to pay free-market rents. This process quickly consolidated the center for the upper strata and relegated those in the lower strata to the periphery. Moreover, it represents the rejection of the collectivity of the *superquadra* in favor of the free-market and the failure of one of modernist theory basic principles: the creation of a classless society.

From Egalitarian Utopia to Segregated Reality

Brasilia segregates in different ways. As was mentioned above, the city was planned along two highways designed especially for the automobile, which for Le Corbusier was the symbol of the machine age, progress, speed and efficiency. However, access to a car implies a certain amount of economic resources most poor and low-income people do not have. Just as the spatial mismatch in American cities makes it difficult for inner-city poor to access better jobs and opportunities in the suburbs (Goldsmith and Blakely 1992, Abrahamson 1996), the mostly poor or low-income inhabitants of Brasilia's satellite towns, which developed

despite being prohibited, do not have easy access to the Plano Piloto. This, as Holston (1989) argues, "places the poor at a distinct disadvantage both in finding and in keeping a job" (160) and also leads to a stratified use of the city according to class lines.

Brasilia also denies the possibility of articulating different visions of the city through public life. Even if Brasilia has plenty of accessible open space, few people use it because Brasilienses "no longer see themselves as participating in an outdoor public domain of social life" (Holston 1989, 311). By designing a city for the automobile, Brasilia eliminated the spontaneity, openness, and democratic feeling of Jane Jacobs' streets (Berman 1988, 318). The street, what Lewis Mumford called "the theater of social activity" and interaction, is not in Brasilia the place for unexpected encounters, street games, or the little shop around the corner; the casual conversation, the night walk, or the spontaneous interaction of different people from different backgrounds. Likewise, there are no "eyes upon the street" (Jacobs 1961, 35) in Brasilia, and the street is no longer, as Jacobs' streets are, the heart of the city. As a result, social life is confined to private spaces, accessible only to those considered equals, and stratified according to social class or economic well-being. Much in the same way as the divide between American suburbs and inner cities, Brasilia's public life is confined to interior spaces that do not reproduce the outdoor, unrestricted public life of the street, where noncommercial activities such as discussion, protest, or celebration occurs between and within different social groups. Brasilia's shopping malls, private clubs, and exclusive residential enclaves, like American suburban malls, neighborhood associations, and gated communities, exclude those who do not belong and create a social divide among those who have and those who have not. Moreover, the possibility of mediation and interaction between classes and social groups is limited and those in a less favorable position, as Abrahamson (1996), Goldsmith and Blakely (1992), and Wacquant (1997) show, become marginalized and confined to an inferior quality of life and lesser opportunities. Moreover, in Brasilia, as Dreir et al (2001) persuasively argued for American cities, place also matters. Brasilienses' possibilities of success seem to be inversely related to the distance between place of residence and the Plano Piloto. In sum, truly public spaces, where social life occurs, diverse interests are negotiated, and the city is experienced, that is, where "substantive citizenship" (Holston 1998) is internalized and expressed, are absent in Brasilia: space in Brasilia has been privatized.

In this sense, Brasilia reproduces, and even maximizes, the distinction between privileged center (the Plano Piloto), and underprivileged periphery (satellite towns) that is so common in other Brazilian and Latin American cities, and

inversely so in the United States. As Holston (1989) shows, the percentage of people living in Brasilia's periphery is greater than in other Brazilian cities. Likewise, Brasilia completely separates elite and middle-class residential quarters (the Plano Piloto) from lower class neighborhood and slums (satellite towns), whereas in other cities they are intertwined at least to a certain degree. Moreover, this separation is spatially unequivocal. Brasilia's Plano Piloto is surrounded by a "green belt" (a provision set in the Master Plan) and the closest satellite town is 12 miles away from the city center. Finally, Brasilia's income differences between center and periphery are far greater than in other Brazilian cities. All these facts contradict the plans' egalitarian intentions.

Conclusions

Brasilia clearly demonstrates the role of government in promoting inequality, as Fishman (1999), Goldsmith and Blakely (1992), and Dreir et al (2001) show for America. Brasilia's plan created a city *for* an elite bureaucracy, "a minority population with privileged access to a public domain of resources which excluded the vast majority" (Holston 1989, 205). Moreover, Brasilia's reality completely contradicts both the planners' and government's intentions, which aimed to transform society and create a new social structure. Instead, the segregation and inequality that Brasilia created exceeds that of other Brazilian cities, which seems to support the argument of Dreir et al (2001) that treating unequals equally reinforces inequality.

Brasilia is a clear example of the limitations of theory itself. Modernist planning did provide Brasilia's planners with a specific and explicit set of guidelines, concepts, and principles. However, it created a "formalistic shell for living" that did not transform the *status quo* but made it even more explicit. The development of Brasilia demonstrates that cities are the consequence of personal decisions and choices; moreover, that they are not products but processes. Even if the process is determined *a priori*, the product cannot be because people, actual, real people, are unpredictable. Holston (1998, 46) argues that modernist planning theory failed to consider the unintended and the unexpected as part of the model. It should be noted that in fact *all* social theory would never be able to plan for the unexpected; cities and humans are way too complex for that. The planner, the architect, the politician, the social scientist, can only try "to create conditions that *might* set in motion processes" (Abu-Lughod 1993, 32; emphasis added).

At the end of his book, Holston (1989) states that, "We need not attempt to resolve the paradoxes of planning… Instead, as social critics, we need to retain the kind of

commitment to planning, to alternative features, which acknowledges and even emphasizes the necessary dilemma of being caught between the utopian contradictions of imagining a better world and the unacceptability of reproducing the status quo" (317). It is for understanding the dilemma and for informing the process, not for providing totalizing solutions, that we need theory.

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