

REFLECTING ON BRASILIA

It took a year or two of living in Brasilia and travelling around the rest of the country before I came to understand the mystique of Brasilia. It may have its faults, but it was an extraordinary achievement to create a thriving city virtually in the middle of nowhere. It responds to the dreams of the republican founders of Brazil who designated the site of the national capital in the constitution of 1889. The Italian saint, Don John Bosco, is the city's patron saint, because, although he never visited Brazil, he dreamed of a land of milk and honey at exactly that location a hundred years before the city was built.

Brasilia is a grand project, and as an experiment in the totally planned design and creation of a city, it has been successful, in that nearly a million and a half people live in the federal district, where in 1956 there was nothing but a few remote and sleepy little agricultural towns 800 km from a city of any significance. The main government buildings of the new capital photograph well and look clean and modern from a distance. They are a tribute to structural concrete, form over function, and life built around the automobile. But concrete does not wear well and not all Brazilians drive a car.

Brasilia's architect and creator, Oscar Niemeyer, made his reputation in Rio de Janeiro and the adjoining state of Minas Gerais, designing buildings in the manner of Le Corbusier. President Juscelino Kubitschek, who finally brought to fruition the old Brazilian dream of building Brasilia, was Niemeyer's patron in his days as governor of Minas Gerais, and so chose Niemeyer to bring his vision to the high plains of the undeveloped interior. Niemeyer considered himself an architectural sculptor and scarcely gave much thought to the functional requirements of his edifices. Beautiful wide avenues were laid out and crafty patterns of traffic flow designed. Inspired by socialist principles, the city plan created egalitarian but soulless apartment blocks for everybody, with space reserved for commercial establishments in the neighbourhoods. The main shopping and hotel areas were located in the central core, around the "conjunto nacional" or the national crossroads. The ministries were all laid out in a double row of rectangular blocks along the main esplanade, like a satire on bureaucracy.

Niemeyer professed to be a communist, and after the military coup of 1964, he was persona non grata in Brazil. The military leaders who moved into the new capital in the wilderness proceeded to do things to the city without his consent. Ugly air-conditioning units were installed in the windows of the sleek ministries; an area of individual private housing was opened up across the artificial lake from the main town; marble facing was put on the Justice building; and above all, trees were planted to break the bleakness of open spaces - a concept that Niemeyer considered a sacrilege because it obscured the lines of his sculptures.

Wide avenues and expressways to the centre of town are certainly modern, but they lose their utility when they prevent pedestrians from communicating between city blocks, and force tourists to trudge across sear avenidas in the dry season to visit the architectural marvels of the capital. A city of a million people needs rapid transportation to function in the modern world, and its inhabitants need the relief of trees, vegetation and accessible parks to develop an attachment to the city.

When I approach Brasilia by road, after leaving the dense and choking metropolises of Rio and Sao Paulo and driving through the dusty, poor and backward little towns of the Brazilian interior, I realize the new highways to the capital have transformed and opened up this region of the great Brazilian interior. Brasilia has provided the focal point for spreading "life and progress" into the undeveloped hinterland, just as its designers anticipated.

by Richard Belliveau



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