The Unexpected Similarities between Broadacre City and Brasilia

Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier are two of America's most influential architects. From their city plans to building designs, they differed in terms of style and solutions to common urban problems. While Frank Lloyd Wright was a proponent of a more organic, individualistic city plan, Le Corbusier supported the idea of a modern city that coexisted with technology.

Le Corbusier designed several communities from the Ville Contemporaine in 1922 to the Ville Radieuse in 1924. These cities encouraged novel architectural designs that incorporated green space under and surrounding tall buildings at regular intervals, coining the term "towers in the park". These plans were originally designed to combat the prevalent problem of congestion in the city. Unlike Wright, the plans of Le Corbusier were somewhat actualized in the planning of Brasilia, the then-new capital of Brazil. Brasilia, a city planned by Lucio Costa and designed by Oscar Niemeyer, was a direct response to the modernist city movement, mimicking the ideals of Le Corbusier's Ville Radieuse. Travel was mainly by car, buildings were modern and spread out and the model was a tabula rasa, built on completely flat land which was considered ideal topography. Le Corbusier's modernist city exemplified the idea of simply expanding the city so that the automobile was the main mode of transportation. Doing so would open up the traditional city by decongesting the roads and allowing people to move more freely through the city at higher speeds.[1] In the plan of the Ville Radieuse, there exists open space for the automobile to navigate as well as space between each building to decongest the city. The plan is similar to that of Brasilia which also has wide expanses of open space along with towers at regular intervals in both the monumental and residential axes.

In 1934, Wright conceptualized the theory of an improved city, Broadacre City. This theoretical city was founded on the principles of decentralization, movement away from the city. It focused heavily on the individual/familial household and its incorporation with modern technology. The anti-city movement was to encourage individualism. Broadacre City was a direct counterargument to Le Corbusier's Modern City. Instead of a more urban model, Broadacre City supported moving the city back to the countryside and back to the Jeffersonian grid. Only in this way would the congestion
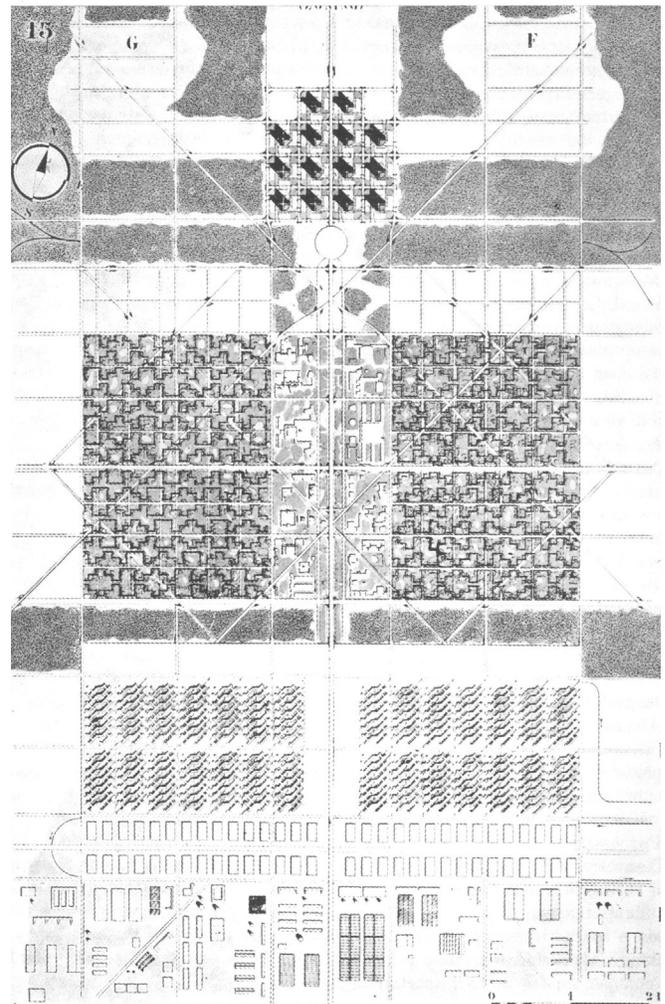
La planimetria della Ville Radieuse (Le Corbusier).
...itazioni; R, alberghi e ambasciate; C, città degli affari; D, industrie; E, industrie pesanti (fra le due i depositi generali e i d...
..., G, nuclei satelliti con caratteri speciali (per es., città degli studi, centro del governo, ecc.); H, stazione ferroviaria e aeroporto...

Figure 1
Ville Radieuse plan by Le Corbusier, 1933
source: Le Corbusier. ca. 1930. Ville Radieuse, Overall plan. architecture; plans. http://library. artstor.org.proxy.library.emory.edu/asset/ SS35507_35507_20824002.

and high density problem of the traditional city be solved.

The intention of the city for the inhabitants to stray away from busy city centers and instead focus on the self and family in order to enjoy true freedom from life in the city. Wright himself states that "the individual home of the individual family group…will enjoy in the country a freedom, a richness in life".[2] He proposed a life that would depend more on nature, as well as new technological advancements such as the automobile and his invention, the aerator. The purpose of expanding to the country is to return to the roots of organic architecture and become "harmonious with nature" rather than encounter roads that have "already archaic telegraph and telephone poles and wires" and are instead "free of blaring bill boards and obsolete construction".[3] In the plan of Broadacre city, the central focus is the residential area. The areas that usually support gatherings of people are pushed towards the edges of the plan. The highway lining the bottom of the figure acts as a "feeder for all life".[4] As shown in the model of Broadacre city (figure 2), the factories are collected around the area above
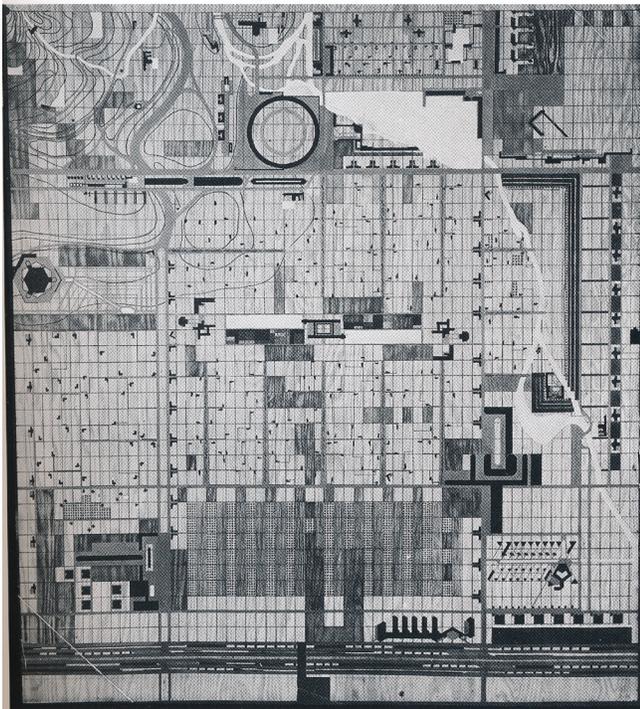

Figure 2
Broadacre City project. Plan (highway on bottom) source: Neil Levine,The Urbanism of Frank Lloyd Wright(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 173.

the highway. The middle horizontal bands are set aside for residential areas while the communal centers, schools, and even government buildings are pushed towards the top edge near the triangular body of water. In this way, people would no longer congregate in city centers but instead stay in their homes and focus on their families. Resulting in a decentralization of the city, eliminating the problems of high density cities and traffic.

Broadacre and Brasilia should be polar opposites as Broadacre was created to counter the Radiant City, the city that Brasilia was based on. However, there are more similarities than differences between the two. Both Broadacre City and Brasilia were designed to improve upon the then-current city.

Brasilia was founded as the new capital of Brazil in 1960. The notion to move the capital was directed by President Kubitschek who believed that a change in location, away from the populated east coast and towards the center of the country would improve and more directly address the problems all of Brazil was facing. Brasilia was intended to launch the third world country of Brazil into a new modern age. Developing on new land in the middle of the country was a significant risk, however President Kubitschek felt it was necessary in order to transform the "semi-colonial, semi-developed country into a new Brazil, independent and strong".[5] Lucio Costa was appointed to plan the city while Oscar Niemeyer designed the buildings. With President Kubitschek's original intent in mind, Costa and Niemeyer's built the city of Brasilia to exude monumentality with edifices that symbolized power and independence. The character of the city was designed to be grandiose. Costa's plan is referred to as the Plano Piloto, resembling a giant bird or plane. The spine of the bird is the monumental axis which lays on natural elevation that contains the administrative and government buildings including the Supreme Court, national Congress Complex and the president's residential area. Cutting across this main axis towards the center and making up the wings of the bird is the residential axis that contains superquadras or super blocks. Every four superquadras would form a neighborhood unit which would be equipped with communal spaces such as churches, cinemas, sports clubs, community centers etc.[6] (figure 3) The intersection of the two axes was recognized as the heart of the city where business centers,

hotels and workplaces are located. Brasilia was seen as an important step to modernize Brazil, but it did not turn out the way it was intended. Instead, Niemeyer was criticized for building at the scale of the monument and not the city, making the city feel inhabitable from the view of the denizen.

Although the architects had contrasting views for the two cities in some ways, Brasilia and Broadacre City have more similarities than differences. In terms of the realities of civic life and the use of technology, both cities may not have had similar intentions, but had similar implementations. Additionally, while one is influenced by the modernist city and the other the anti-city, both were influenced by democracy though the implementation is different. In these ways, Brasilia and Broadacre City, two seemingly radically different plans are alike.

Civic life or the "spirit" is an important aspect of any city. Here civic life is defined as public involvement in the community, whether that be participating with others in clubs or simply engaging with others in public areas such as parks.
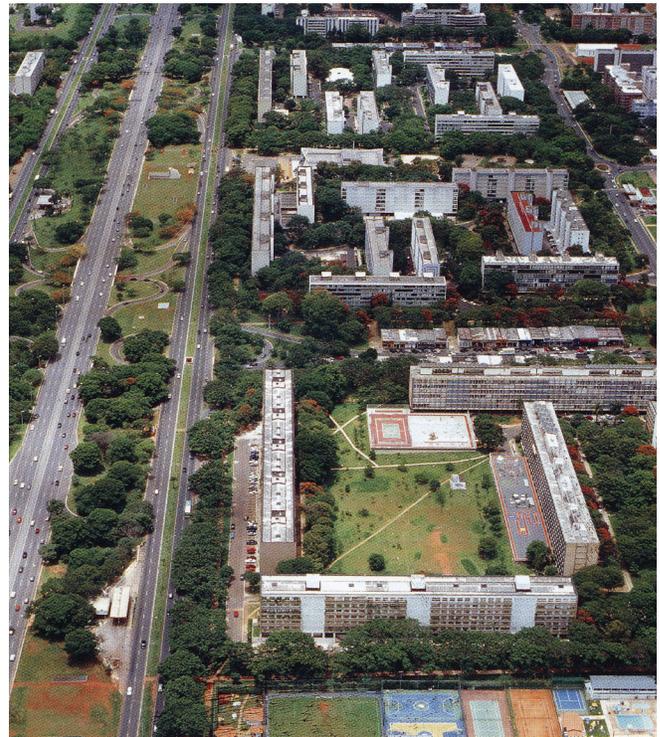
Figure 3
Aerial view of Brasilia's superquadras
source: Philippou,Oscar Niemeyer, 299.
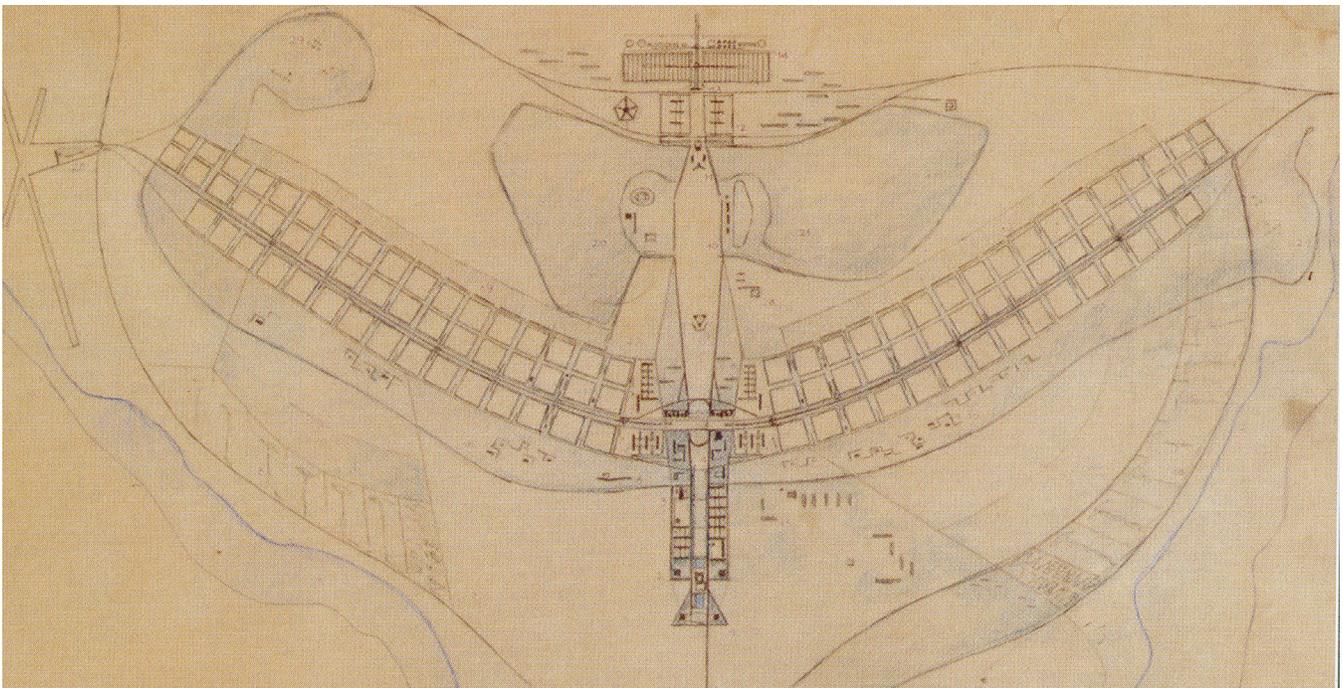
Figure 4
Lucio Costa, Plano Piloto, winning entry to the competition for the masterplan of Brasilia, 10 March 1957
source: Styliane Philippou,Oscar Niemeyer: Curves of Irreverence(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 219.

Broadacre City is against the idea of community centers as it opposes the idea of decentralization.

The basis for Broadacre City is to focus on bringing individuals away from a centralized area. Because of this, community centers did not function as areas that would promote civic life "commercial bustle or humdrum" but should rather be "quiet places for study reflection and introspection, in comradeship".[7] These communal centers would be near major highways or in "some nook of the countryside", preferably somewhere that is off to the side and not as easily accessible as the center of the community.[8] Rather than have the center of the city be a great gathering place, Wright places an area designed to encourage civic life in the corner away from the focus of the city, the individualistic homes. When describing community life in his method of organic architecture, Wright argues that community life is "no longer necessary nor as charming…as it used to be".[9] Because of the separation of centers of community life to the residential areas, automobiles were necessary to be able to move around in the city.

Wright's intention of the use of the automobile was to be able to move the city into the country side. This was his proposed solution to the problem of congestion and high density cities. The automobile and aerator would be the means of connecting the individual from his/her acre of land to other acres of land and communal spaces in order to create a sense of "comradeship" rather than community.[10] Although Wright's Broadacre city is somewhat conservative in its call to return to the land, the incorporation and use of modern technology to combat the problems of the traditional city are similar to Brasilia's use of modern technology as well. Brasilia was built with the incorporation of technology to induce civic life; however, the implementation was not successful and resulted in a lack of community as intended in Broadacre city.

As capital of the country, Brasilia's goal as to revitalize Brazil, to be the source of energy and civic life. From the beginning, Niemeyer and Costa "made civic life a priority".[11] Brasilia was to have "civitas," wrote Costa, in his words "the virtues and attributes appropriate to a true capital city".[12] Lucio Costa planned for the city to provide sufficient activities for inhabitants along the city center including an "axes going from the movies to the church, flanked by shops, bars etc. promenades for strolling and meeting".[13] The residential areas were equipped with communal amenities and activities to pursue. Grand expanses of highways were designed to facilitate movement between the residential areas to the heart of the city that acted as a "harbor" where the commercial and hotel sectors existed. Costa also took into consideration the problem of traffic, just as Wright focused heavily on this issue, by having a specialized lane along the North-South residential axis to transport people from the residential areas to center city. This highway would only be for cars while trucks/commercial vehicles would be parallel to the residential road but behind the town.[14] Many ideas were thought of and implemented in order to encourage a greater sense of community in Brasilia. However, the spirit of the city can't be planned and is something that must be left to the human and his/her interaction with the architecture. As Kneese de Mello proclaims, "spirit is born from the concordance of content and form".[15]

Despite the planning, Brasilia failed as a city center. When the French writer, Simone de Beauvoir visited Brasilia, her account exemplifies the standard person's first impression of Brasilia when entering the city for the first time. She states how the place does not "resemble a city but a giant architectural model".[16] The scale of the buildings is "inhumane" and she notices how impossible is it to travel anywhere without a car. She goes as far as to state that going out to buy a lipstick is a "punishing expedition" because of the long distance, heat and sun.[17] Similar to the Radiant City that Brasilia was based upon, transportation was designed to be solely by car in order to emphasize the modernity and success of the city. Costa had envisioned the city as one of "highways and skyways" to symbolize the modern, unified central government.[18] In such a sense, Brasilia was built to be the city of the machine and not the human. After the implementation of Brasilia, Niemeyer realized that his city's social conditions at the time were not conducive to the spirit he was trying to embody for the Plana Piloto. At the time of designed Brasilia, he thought that "invention should be the highest priority".[19] Afterwards Niemeyer admits that the city, "if anything, exacerbated the social problems it was supposed to solve" because of his attempt to make a socialist city in a country that was not yet socialist.[20] Reflecting back Niemeyer states that the city

was constructed as a showcase of capitalism and when asked to designed an urban utopia again he would design a city "destined for the human being rather than the machine".[21] In the end, despite Costa's effort to include all the factors he thought necessary to induce civic life, it was the poor layout and imposing architecture that drove people away from the heart of the city. So while Brasilia was planned to have a bustling city center, the capital ended up having as much civic life as the proposed center of Broadacre City.

Another aspect which emphasizes the similarities between Wright's Broadacre City and Costa and Niemeyer's Brasilia is the similar reference to democracy during their city planning. Although the reality of Brasilia is different from the original intention, both city planners/architects had wanted to incite a feeling of freedom and justice for the people through the layout of the city.

Kubitschek's vision for the new capital included starting from scratch and building a monumental capital to "project the confidence of the many in a democratic, post-colonial Brazil".[22] The overall aim of the monumental axis of Brasilia was a project designed to demonstrate the power of the legislature in symbol. The bold architectural representation of the legislative, executive and judicial branch defined by the national Congress complex, the Alvorada Palace, and the Supreme Court lies at the very end of the monumental axis, rising up as large grandiose edifices (figure 5). Niemeyer's intention of creating monumental government buildings was to represent the stability of Brazil's democratic institution and to convey the eminence and cohesion of Brazilian society. Costa's original goal was to avoid class segregation; he believed that "state ownership of the land would guarantee a more democratic urban spatial structure".[23] However, despite all the positive intentions, state ownership backfired and Brasilia regressed back to strong class segregation.

While Brasilia's recruitment campaign emphasized democracy of the new capital, the realities of social Brasilia were just as stratified in terms of class as the previous capital and the rest of the country. Niemeyer and Costa focused too much on the potential of the city rather than facing the reality of the conditions in Brazil. In order to maintain

Figure 5
Niemeyer, National Congress complex, Brasilia. 1958-1960
source: David Kendrick Underwood and Oscar Niemeyer,Oscar Niemeyer and the Architecture of Brazil(New York: Rizzoli, 1994),128.

the idea that everyone would live as equals, identical residential apartments superquadras were built along the residential axis. Even then, there were people who were unable to afford the options of superquadras in the residential axis, forcing Costa to build a series of affordable residential apartments that lined the outside of the Plano Piloto.[24] When referring to the big picture, these superquadras themselves weren't the issue. The drastic difference in scale and nobility of the architecture on the residential axis versus the monumental axis placed emphasis on the difference between the all-powerful and noble governing people and the commoners. Even within the Monumental axis, there exists a blatant contrast between the monumental grandiose governmental that exist on the monumental axis and the mundane slabs at which the bureaucrats work. This clear distinction proves the ministry buildings "weak as individual aesthetic statements" and as holding a secondary status in the functional hierarchy of the city.[25] (figure 6) Brasilia is so intent on keeping its clean and modern façade that even the favelados, the poor migrants who were paid to construct Brasilia, were denied a place to stay in the city they had built.[26] Overall the plan of Brasilia neither solved the social dilemma

nor did it offer solutions for the poor other than to move them out of the two main axes of the city. In this way, the architecture encourages the segregation between classes, rebutting against the original intentions of exhibiting Brasilia as a democratic city, a city for the people.

Similarly, Broadacre City was designed upon the tenets of democracy and allowed each man to provide for himself. In this case, democracy calls for the fair representation of man in his 1 acre of land. In Wright's proposed ideal city, he dictates that the city return to the use of the Jeffersonian grid and that 1 acre of land should be assigned to each family. There would be no model of how one chooses to use his/her land. Instead "architecture will be in the service of the man himself" which allows the individual to create appropriate new buildings in harmony.[27] There would be no style designated for the individual in his land but rather the different styles of all the acres combined would create a style of its own. The use of the grid system allows each 1 acre of land to be unique and gives the owners a sense of ownership and pride to their own acre of land. This self-sufficient way of living allows Broadacre City to have a viable solution for the poor, unlike

Figure 6
Aerial view of the Monumental Axis with surrounding ministry buildings.
source: Philippou,Oscar Niemeyer, 232.

Brasilia. In Broadacre city, the poor will be able to re-establish himself in society efficiently. Broadacre city would offer for sale various standardized cheap units such as kitchens and bathrooms. As the poor man earns wages at the factory and sells his produce from the small garden on his 1 acre of land, he will be able to accumulate more standardized units with aid in the form of tax exemption. Eventually he will earn enough to completely furnish his land and still the "finished whole is an expression of himself need not be lacking in individuality".[28] Overall, the "democratic" way of living is a major component of Wright's Broadacre City. While the reality of Brasilia differed from its intentions, Broadacre City and Brasilia both were designed to promote a greater democracy and equality for the people.

In conclusion, Broadacre and Brasilia should have been polar opposites as both are influenced by different movements in architectural history, however there are similarities between the intentions and realities of the two cities.

Broadacre City supported the anti-city movement that called for the movement away from the city that was created to counter the modern city. This city called for a strong sense of democracy where people were expected to live equally by providing for their own acre land. Transportation was not seen as a means to display modernism but rather a tool to connect the land. On the other hand, Brasilia was built as a symbol of power and the new age of modernism in Brazil. There was the intention to incite a feeling of democracy by having the buildings of the government at the tip of the monumental axis exude power to the people. The other important aspect, civic life, was planned to thrive with the usage of the vast transportation networks to connect the residential areas to the hub of the city. While the reality of Brasilia's class segregation was not intended, both Brasilia and Broadacre City were planned with the hope of creating a city for the people in terms of equal representation for all. In terms of civic life and transportation, Broadacre City used transportation as a means to achieve minimal civil life. Brasilia had intended to use transportation as a means to achieve maximal civic life. The capital was supposed to be a city that espoused a sense of community with the help of automobiles; however, in actuality resulted in less civic life as the city was built more for the automobile than the human. In the end, Brasilia faced a decentral-ization away from the center, just as was intended in Broadacre City. Overall, these two seemingly contrasting cities are actually more alike than not.

Endnotes

1. Neil Levine,The Urbanism of Frank Lloyd Wright(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016),178.
2. Frank Lloyd Wright and Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer,The Essential Frank Lloyd Wright: Critical Writings on Architecture(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010),253.
3. Ibid.
4. Levine,The Urbanism,170.
5. Eduardo Kneese De Mello,Brasilia, 2nd ed. (n.p.: Uma Publicacao Acropole, 1960),19.
6. Styliane Philippou,Oscar Niemeyer: Curves of Irreverence(New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008),299.
7. Wright and Pfeiffer,The Essential,267.
8. Ibid.
9. Frank Lloyd Wright,Frank Lloyd Wright on Architecture: Selected Writings 1894-1940, ed. Fredrick Gutheim (Rahway: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1941),254.
10. Wright and Pfeiffer,The Essential,267.
11. Richard J. Williams, "Modernist Civic Space and the Case of Brasilia,"Journal of Urban History32, no. 1 (November 2005):125, digital file.
12. Ibid.
13. De Mello,Brasilia,44.
14. Ibid., 40.
15. Ibid., 44.
16. Williams, "Modernist Civic,"127.
17. Ibid.
18. Philippou,Oscar Niemeyer,224.
19. Oscar Niemeyer,Oscar Niemeyer -Eine Legende Der Moderne: [anlaÌ̂ sslich Der Ausstellung "Oscar Niemeyer. Eine Legende Der Moderne -a Legend of Modernism, 1. MaÌ̂ rz -11 Mai 2003 Im Deutsches Architektur Museum, Frankfurt Am Main], ed. Paul Andreas (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsches Architekturmuseum, 2003),129.
20. Williams, "Modernist Civic,"131.
21. Philippou,Oscar Niemeyer,228.
22. Ibid., 250.
23. Ibid., 227.
24. Ibid.
25. David Kendrick Underwood and Oscar Niemeyer,Oscar Niemeyer and the Architecture of Brazil(New York: Rizzoli, 1994),124.
26. Ibid., 101.

27. Wright and Pfeiffer,The Essential,252.
28. Ibid., 261.

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