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CAPITAL IN A VOID: MODERNIST MYTHS OF BRASILIA

Pedro Palazzo and Luciana Saboia

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Brasilia, Brazil’s capital, inaugurated in 1960, is a staple subject in the criticism of Modernist urbanism. It was both hailed and decried by major theorists and historians since even before its completion, but remains often misunderstood. The objective of this paper is to analyze the interpretive discourse on Brasilia, with an emphasis on its central bus station, in terms of mythical structures. Three such structures can be identified and related to three different “functions” of discourse on Brasilia: first, that of the authority ascribed to Lucio Costa’s original master plan that won the competition in 1957; second, that of the construction process itself, stressing the heroic deeds of President Juscelino Kubitschek and of the anonymous construction workers; third, that of growth and preservation of the city, which looks back on an idealized golden age whence Brasilia’s design has decayed. Even authors, such as James Holston, who have attempted earlier to criticize “myths” about the city, have given in to one or more of these mythical structures.

The design for the central city of Brasilia—currently only one in a string of neighborhoods comprising Brazil’s fourth most populated metropolitan area—is famous for its crossing of two axes: the Residential axis, lined with superblocks, and the Monumental, comprising the political and symbolic functions of the city. At the crossing itself, surrounded by the city’s CBD, lies, not a monument or a political building, but a void: the superimposed levels of the central bus station.

The bus station platform, a monumental structure connecting the south and north parts of the central area of Brasilia, embodies the ideal of the modernist void. The huge structure fades in the monumental landscape due to its extreme horizontality, blending into the city’s smooth terrain (Fig. 1).

The wide belvedere that becomes transit platform overlooks on either side the Esplanade of Ministries and the opposite stretch of the Monumental Axis, towards the dominant verticality of the TV tower. This immense void of the platform is the main direct north-south link, for

Figure 1. The Bus Station Platform in 1964. Source: Public Archive of the Federal District
both pedestrians and vehicles, within the urban core of the capital.

Over 800,000 transit riders and other citizens use the bus terminal each day. Most of them take part in the daily pendular commute that brings scores of workers to the planned capital city from the scores of satellite towns and other cities that make up its metropolitan area (Fig. 2).

In 2012, this area houses nearly 3 million people and mostly service-sector jobs. Being at the symbolic center of the metropolis, the bus terminal is also, thanks to its architectural features, the grand urban void where diverse personal and collective narratives intermingle, bringing together high-modernist Brasilia and satellite-town Brasilia.

In each of the three following sections we shall address one myth pertaining to Brasilia, exposing its foundation tale, then its ritual reenactment of sorts in later discourse, and its implications in the case of the central bus station.

The first mythical structure is that which defines the city as a direct materialization of its original design. The idea of Brasilia is held hostage to an established discourse centered on the need to bring about this foundational image. Reference to its heroic creators, urban designer Lucio Costa and
The second mythical structure is the explanatory apparatus of the Brasilia-myth as that of a heroic achievement. This explanation, in fact a long string of narratives and laws regarding the construction of a new seat of government, stretching back into the mid-eighteenth century, stresses the opposition between the civilizing act of city-building and the purported cultural void in which it is to take place. It is, therefore, an individuated act, of which the major performer is the appropriately heroic figure of President Juscelino Kubitschek.

The third mythical structure is the millennial discourse locked between the unrealized past of the first structure and the denial of the present city. The foundation myth is reenacted, in an attempt to draw from the myth instructions for the historic preservation of Brasilia. It also gives birth to a rhetoric of absence, inasmuch as the original design, the 1957 Pilot Plan report, is superseded irrevocably by its very materialization, yet lives forever in a nostalgic narrative. It is by means of this use that the narrative gains actuality, thus fulfilling the operative requirement of the myth. The preservationist discourse fostered in this way tends to favor a static view of the city in which the void, to begin with an indispensable asset where the heroic act of city-building takes place, ends up considered a liability. Thus, in the end the Modernist public space is seen not as a relationship of matter and void where flows and socio-spatial practices can happen, but as lacunae to be filled in authoritatively. This is based on the fact that the original design is sufficiently open, both spatially and conceptually, to be invoked as authoritative while being arbitrarily interpreted by the competent discourse—in such a way as to disenfranchise non-specialists from public debate.

The central Bus station is one case where the void survives as a key factor in the social appropriation of Brasilia. The mythology of the foundational design, however, results in a drive to “complete” the space with a number of urban designs and policy decisions bent on retrieving this elusive original intent. Actual social appropriations of the space are, on the other hand, driven into the background by this mythology.

MYTH OF AUTHORITY: THE ELUSIVE ORIGIANL DESIGN

As befits a major mythical structure of modern architecture, Brasilia’s tale begins with a creation. At a very basic level of understanding, “the myth recounts how—as stated by Eliade—thanks to the achievements of the Supernatural Beings, a reality has come into existence ... it is therefore always the record of a creation.” (Eliade, 1966, p. 15) Nevertheless, such “creations” can be quite contrived to suit the interests of group legitimacy, as Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) and others have shown. The belief in an “original design” for Brasilia is one such case where the myth of creation is used as a justification for certain contemporary attitudes. “A tradition seems all the more effective and binding
when it goes back to early times and when it is said to have been continuously followed.” (Lenclud, 1994, p. 29)

Brasilia is identified with the actualization of the Pilot Plan Report, Lucio Costa’s winning entry for the 1957 competition to select the governing idea behind the construction of the capital. It is a series of 23 written topics with accompanying sketches and the required general plan. The report describes not only the morphology and architectural typologies to be used in the city, but also significantly the organization of traffic and pedestrian flows in each sector. The latter was to become the most widely recognized feature of the city, together with its unique take on the neighborhood unit.

In order to stress the imaginative powers of this “creation,” much weight is given in the historiography of Brasilia to the hasty completion of the design at the last moment before submissions for the competition were due (Holston, 1989; Wisnik, 2010). The starting point of this ethos of the impromptu creation is Lucio Costa’s Pilot Plan report itself, in which he claims with undisguised false modesty to have “relieved himself” (sic) of a possible solution that came to his mind fully formed. Hardly any commentator has ever since missed the opportunity to contrast this claim with the minutely though-out argument in the remainder of the project description (Holston, 1989, p. 67).

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Creation par excellence is deliberate (Bottéro, 1992, p. 231), brought about by the power of speech alone with hardly a menial task (Bottéro, 1992, pp. 240-241), and, of course, so far beyond any human achievement as to be above all judgment (Bottéro, 1992, pp. 218-219). All three features have been more or less implicitly ascribed to Lucio Costa’s design over time.

The first is evident in the ethos of the very late submission—it was neither necessary nor inevitable, but happened to have been finished just in time. The second is suggested by the astonishing uncraftsmanlike appearance of Lucio Costa’s sketches and the prominence of the written report over the drawings; Holston incorrectly claims that Costa submitted “not a single mechanical drawing” (Holston, 1989), yet his error is itself part of this myth of the original design. The third aspect is more controversial; Lucio Costa’s design had its detractors from the beginning, with the dissenting opinion in the competition jury; the aspect’s relevance to the matter of mythology in Brasilia will be addressed in the third section of this paper.

Lucio Costa’s proposal is thus seen as parallel to the creation of a New World—the rhetoric of colonizing the Brazilian territory as a latter-day conquistador would do is evident in his own text, which speaks of “taking possession” of the land. This in turn has led to the belief that he established a fully-formed design to be implemented mechanically, or at least that further development of his ideas was the task of an exegetic process by means of which the one true meaning of the text was to be rendered in concrete.

This has had two practical consequences. Firstly, several critiques of the Pilot Plan—most, though by no means all, from the architectural point of view—assume that the qualities and flaws of the actual city are direct consequences either of the competition proposal, or of its having been incorrectly developed.
Secondly, the collective construction of Brasilia’s role as a heritage site, begun in the city’s infancy during the early 1960s by means of the San Tiago Dantas Bill,\(^2\) has fallen victim to this myth of the original design; this law, for example, states that the *Pilot Plan* is protected by federal mandate, assuming the actual city to be identical with the plan. In local parlance, the core city of Brasilia, when distinguished from the satellite towns, is still today commonly referred to as “the Pilot Plan,” a slip that suggests the competition proposal is conflated with the city that was actually built.

To see how widespread such a myth is, suffice to say that James Holston, himself one of the strongest critics of the Brasilia “mythology,” is himself a prisoner of the discourse of the original design. When trying to unravel the genesis of Lucio Costa’s plan or when analyzing subsequent official development in the city, his chief frame of reference is the purported actualization of a program to be found even earlier than 1957, in the CIAM doctrines (Holston, 1989). He then goes on to claim that Lucio Costa’s design is a direct implementation of the CIAM program, a misconception he shares with Kenneth Frampton. The latter holds that Brasilia is merely another take on the Ville Radieuse or even Chandigarh (Frampton, 1985, p. 256); Frederico de Holanda debunks this assumption, showing how it departs both from a reading of the Athens Charter and from the organization of Chandigarh (Holanda, 2010, p. 91). Finally, Holston reports having heard from city officials that construction being carried out in the city at the time of his field research was nothing more than the “final solution,” a “return to the principles of the Master Plan,” and concludes that these principles are indeed achieved because of the absence of street life (Holston, 1989, pp. 141-143). The “plan mythology” that Holston so sharply criticizes is thus fully at work even in his own writing; he is unable to see the existing city as functioning at any deeper level than as actualization—successful or not—of what he calls the “hidden agenda” of its theoretical plan.

The 1957 Pilot Plan was little more than a statement of parti, an idea to be developed into a full-fledged design. Ficher and Leitão showed with excruciating historical detail how the development of the actual city from the competition proposal was not, and could not have been, a mere application or exegesis of Lucio Costa’s report:

> That is, the transposition of the Pilot Plan for Brasilia (PPB) to physical reality, even as it resulted in an artifact with undeniable ties to Lucio Costa’s original sketches, in which the powers of synthesis and strength of expression of its admirable author are made present, determined an urban configuration to which other factors also contributed, and where the interventions of other individuals and groups were made present. (Ficher & Leitão, 2010, p. 99)

These interventions began as early as during the jury session itself (Ficher & Leitão, 2010, p. 112), which issued a few recommendations. They were carried out for the most part during detailing by the Urban Design Department of Novacap, the public corporation set up to oversee the construction of Brasilia, without the participation of Lucio Costa (Ficher & Leitão, 2010, pp. 104-105). The “original author” was not even present at the inauguration of the city. Even where Lucio Costa’s 1957 proposal was quite specific, a number of major changes were introduced. The Esplanade of Ministries was widened by 120m in order to accommodate Oscar Niemeyer’s design for the Congress building, reaching a total width of
360m (Lima & Costa, 1985, p. 188). This resulted in a much longer platform over the bus terminal and in an even stronger rift between the northern and southern halves of the city. As a consequence, the wide expanse unprotected from the elements was even harsher to cross, causing further segregation right where the hustle and bustle of pedestrian life was supposed to be greatest.

As proposed in the PPB, the bus terminal is sited just beyond the dip that separates the mall before the TV Tower from the Esplanade of Ministries, along the Monumental Axis. As constructed, it also becomes a gigantic portal framing the landscape on either side. This frame is itself a complex superimposition of three movement systems. At the lowest level, an underpass is entirely given over to the private car crossing from the southern to the northern part of the city. At ground level, the bus terminal itself stands at the crossing of traffic flows in the north-south and east-west directions. The terminal is organized in such a way that the pedestrian can freely move around from one platform to the other without having to cross any traffic lanes. Accordingly, a host of formal and informal supporting services teem with activity all around the station. The upper platform, i.e., the aforementioned belvedere and pedestrian connection between the north and south parts of the central area, was built as a giant parking lot and connecting streets, despite Lucio Costa having envisioned “creating [there] a great platform free from traffic that shall not be destined to parking, a pedestrian tidal pool of sorts, where the entertainment center of the city was logically centered, with theaters, restaurants, etc.” (Costa, 1995, p. 285) That the formal center of the plan is not its administrative or commercial core but a huge transportation infrastructure has not been missed by most commentators seeking to underline its modernist pedigree as an ode to efficient movement.

Still, Maria Elisa Costa, Lucio Costa’s daughter and architect in charge of the landscaping of two squares on the upper platform in 1976, acknowledges several planning decisions were made only with reference to a graphic interpretation of the original sketches. Therefore, the local government as well as the Heritage service (SPHAN), where she worked, were not concerned with the consequences of such decisions for the urban project as a whole:

> Although those early changes had all been justifiable, there was an ambiguous standing in the way they were approached: the changes themselves were assumed, but the corresponding traffic implications were not. Thus, concern for fidelity to the original drawings unwittingly disregarded one of the most important aspects of the intention that produced them: objectivity and common sense. (Lima & Costa, 1985)

**MYTH OF HEROIC DEEDS: NARRATIVES OF CONSTRUCTION AND SOCIAL APPROPRIATION**

Brasilia is by all accounts considered an achievement of heroic proportions. Much of its fame comes not only from the design, discussed in the previous section, but also from the clever political instrumentalization of the process. For Richard Williams, it is indeed “one of the twentieth century’s great political adventures” (Williams, 2009, p. 95). The history of its precedents and early planning is well
known, yet underplayed in comparison to the protagonist of three major groups of "heroes". First and foremost among them is a single protagonist, President Juscelino Kubitschek, who took special care in constructing his own personality cult as a latter-day pharaoh, builder of Brasilia (Kubitschek, 1975). Then comes the pair of architects endowed with semi-divine creative powers, Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer. Almost as an afterthought, the workmen who actually built the city, known as candangos, were symbolically honored on inauguration day and ever since as the popular heroes of Brasilia.

In addition to being endowed with this host of heroes, Brasilia’s portrayal as a heroic achievement is further strengthened by the view, widespread in both popular discourse and—surprisingly—academic texts, that it was a city built in the middle of nowhere. The rationale, again, is mythical: “To found’, from the Greek ktizein, means first and foremost to clear out, to domesticate, to develop a wild, deserted wasteland supposed to be ‘empty.” (Detienne, 1994, p. 164) Much of what has been written about the construction of Brasilia reinforces this view, either by ignoring immediate historical and geographic precedent or by appealing to far-reaching, non-spatial precedents. Williams describes Brasilia’s setting as “an arid savannah … with virtually no human habitation.” (Williams, 2009, p. 105) Even James Holston, programmatically bent on deconstructing every aspect of what he calls “the myth of the concrete”, implicitly gives credence to the tale that Brasilia was built in a spot “barely Brazilian and hardly suitable for the center of national government.” (Holston, 1989, p. 20)

Other accounts are even more far-fetched. In the 1980s a tale came to be favored, linking a vision by Saint John Bosco (Memorie Biografiche XVI:13, entry for November 12th, 1883), an Italian Marist priest, to the founding of Brasilia. This popular interpretation of the vision will be examined in the next section, but it is also of relevance here inasmuch as it makes a point for an origin of Brasilia that is far removed from the actual context within which it came into being.

The process of building Brasilia is further de-spatialized in Holston’s (and other writers’) genealogy of Brasilia going back to the Athens Charter (Holston, 1989, p. 32); this lineage is, in Holston’s conservative and communitarian view, the epitome of international, i.e., non-local, pedigree—a capital sin according to his anthropological perspective.

The territory where Brasilia was to be built was seen as not only physically empty and depopulated, but also symbolically devoid of both cultural relevance and of its own social and political history. In fact, the tale of President Kubitschek as builder of Brasilia begins with an impromptu remark during his electoral campaign, almost tailor-made to resemble an epiphany: the questioning, by a common citizen, whether Kubitschek intended to fulfill the constitutional dictate of building a new capital (Kubitschek, 1975). Over-emphasizing the significance of this event had the effect of reducing the importance of the several preparatory expeditions that, from 1892 to 1955, had fixed at last the location of the new capital and allowed whichever incumbent came to the presidential palace next to carry out the construction of the new seat of government.
The “creation” of Brasilia then became part of JK’s “Targets plan” as its anchor, dubbed “Synthesis target.” As such, it could not only make an effective electoral punch line, but also promote development of the hinterland through the construction of highways, the promotion of farming and ranching, and the expansion of consumer markets that could foster national industrialization—never mind that such targets were already being pursued for the past thirty years. His slogan “fifty years in five [years’ time]” fit perfectly with the accelerated city-building it would accompany.

Buildings in the central area of Brasilia in the late 1950s and early 60s embodied a public image of modernity. The bus station itself represented an ideal of heroism and socioeconomic emancipation. Built from 1958, as an essential piece of infrastructure for the functioning of the city, its pre-stressed concrete structure was considered at the time a feat of engineering might. Lucio Costa had suggested that construction of the upper platform be postponed until the city were better established, yet Kubitschek insisted on it being built from the start, making sure its execution would not be indefinitely postponed.

The developed design for the bus station privileged the circulation of passengers in its central area, with broad staircases and long escalators linking its three levels—the station itself at ground level, a mezzanine, and the upper platform. The escalators were a tourist attraction in their own right in the early years of the city, as symbols of technology and modernity.

The urbanist was inspired by the grand urban centers of London, New York and Paris when devising the Gregorian core of Brasilia. On the platform, Costa suggested that the entertainment center would be “a mixture, in good proportions, of Piccadilly Circus, Times Square, and Champs Elysées.” He imagined a sophisticated and cosmopolitan place to be the only point of contact between the two symmetrical halves of Brasilia, separated everywhere else by a broad mall.

The heroic discourse about Brasilia was quickly turned against it, starting from the early criticism of its uncalled-for monumentality by Bruno Zevi. Marshall Berman’s attack on Brasilia’s supposedly top-down, paternalistic modernism is then echoed in Holston’s own critique (Wisnik, 2010, p. 13). Edmund Bacon, half-disparagingly, calls it “the great effort”. Brasilia’s critical misfortune is that it was criticized by modernists and post-modernists alike.

At any rate, the belief in Brasilia’s momentous importance was hardly called into question, whether it was hailed or criticized. It is a significant part of the myth of the heroic achievement of Brasilia, that it was long believed most of its original construction workers had come from the impoverished Northeast of Brazil. The discourse on how these large contingents of menial workers, known as candangos, had come to the central highlands in search of a better life—and of how many of them did achieve unprecedented economic improvement—has always been an integral part of this heroic myth. It is now known, however, that most of the candangos came from neighboring Minas Gerais state, an agricultural powerhouse whose population was not particularly wealthy, but still fared better than the poor Nordestinos that symbolize endemic poverty in Brazil.
Later migrants did not find the same opportunities. Unlike the candangos, many of whom were indeed able to raise their children to higher social and economic standards than their own, these later contingents have mostly piled up in peripheral settlements bearing much resemblance to the shantytowns of other major Brazilian cities. Yet, despite the hardships it faces, this population relegated to the outskirts contributes a great deal to the functioning of the city. While unemployment in the Federal District is the highest among Brazilian states, and hits the poor particularly hard, the average income of even the poorest strata of Brasiliense population has always been higher than in other regions of the country. Many of these residents of the periphery work in the Pilot Plan and thus contribute, albeit temporarily, to a certain social mixing in the central area of Brasilia. Additionally, a number of satellite towns had become, by the early 1970s, bustling centers of middle-class living, being themselves socially and economically mixed to some extent. In spite of this, Kenneth Frampton in the 1980s still imagined them all to be shantytowns whose social segregation from the “monumental city” was “enforced” (Frampton, 1985, p. 256) in, one would almost read between the lines, an apartheid-like fashion.

More recent scholarship, especially in the field of urban geography, has striven to understand this social appropriation of the city, but in so doing stresses more the socioeconomic dimension than its spatial organization inasmuch as the latter presents new architectural forms. Studies such as those of Lia Zanotta Machado acknowledge these dynamics and processes of appropriation, however, still considering the design as given, fixed, and not considering possibilities of change. In Aldo Paviani’s research group, the focus is on the metropolitan development of the city, also considering the core built from 1957 as segregated, controlled, and mostly static. Neither author considers social relation in Brasilia’s core city.

Realization that Brasilia was not built in a void, on the other hand, came even later than the acknowledgment of its complex social geography. Even today the fact that the construction of Brasilia was made possible by the existence of a prior network of urban settlements and a road network in the surroundings of its site, is hardly as glamorous as the myth of a creation ex nihilo in the popular view. It is undeniable, nonetheless, that before the venture of Brasilia the region already sported a strong agrarian economy and even a fledgling bourgeois society (Ferreira, 2010, p. 45). The latter was modeled after that of the nearest state capital, Goiânia, itself a recent addition to that landscape at the time.

**MYTH OF THE GOLDEN AGE: FROM THE CAPITAL OF HOPE TO ITS PRESERVATION**

The preservationist discourse in Brasilia is mostly oblivious to the social concerns examined above. Instead, the mythology institutes the “original design” discussed in the first section as the only legitimate object of preservation. Rather than looking at the actual city for guidance on what are the values to be preserved, this reality is continuously compared to an idealized original state that never existed on the ground, and that could never have existed because the PPB was simply not a developed design. Public management thus avoids the responsibility of looking after the effective social appropriation of the city.
When all of Brasilia’s *theoretical* urban qualities and flaws are ascribed to an elusive “original plan”, then all *actual* problems can also be ascribed to an incorrect application of the plan.

The strength of this discourse is such that a sort of ritualistic view of city planning emerges, in which, as in a religious practice, “what has happened *ab origines* is passible of repetition through the force of rites.” (Eliade, 1966, p. 24) Urban thinking comes to be driven by a “rhetoric of absence” (Gonçalves, 1996) that looks for an idealized identity of the PPB, since “it is [only] the first manifestation of something that is [ritually] meaningful and valid, not any of its successive epiphanies.” (Eliade, 1966, p. 48)

In the 1980s, administrative work towards detailing the scope of preservation set forth in the San Tiago Dantas Bill made it clear that the identity then being ascribed to the city was that of a work of art derived from its master plan. When Unesco listed Brasilia as a World Heritage site in 1987, the criteria governing this decision were those of representing “a masterpiece of human creative genius” (1), thus implying individual authorship, and of bearing “an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history” (4), paradoxically implying collective construction. The latter criterion is an obvious choice for a city *qua* social artifact. Yet, the juxtaposition of the former criterion, typically intended for individual works of art, makes clear the conflation between the actual city and Lucio Costa’s Pilot Plan report in the eyes of officials. The plan becomes a lost golden age to which planners of an iron age of sorts look back with longing.

This discourse still fares well in the 21st century. National Heritage chief for the Federal District, Alfredo Gastal, clearly stated in an interview to local newspaper, Correio Braziliense, his denial of any sort of legitimacy for the actual inhabited city and the superiority, in his view, of an as of yet unachieved “dream” embodied in its design:

> I insist in saying that Brasilia is not a city: it is a monument. It was created with this intent. A city inspired by the ideals of accelerated modernity … The goal was to create a dream … of a Brazil that has not gotten there yet. The city is a symbol of this dream. That is why it must not be altered. [emphasis added] (Gastal, 2005)

The delegitimation of the existing city in favor of a “dream” highlights the establishment of a “competent discourse,” whereby a person or group endowed with either intellectual or administrative authority claims the role of making an exegesis of the “original plan.” They in turn denounce what they see as “deformations” in the correct interpretation of this plan as a threat to the establishment of the city, since heritage value is bestowed solely on the theoretical idea, to which the materialized city is merely testimony. Ironically, such an interpretation jeopardizes the very openness and fluidity of intent that characterize any city and that were a hallmark of Lucio Costa’s report.

The subject poses a relevant problem, however: how to preserve the sense of wholeness and clarity in the PPB even as Brasilia must respond to an urban growth much larger than originally anticipated? How can
the city welcome migrants entitled to seek a better life in the capital, without compromising efficient transportation and the simultaneously bucolic and monumental character of the capital?

A first step would be to acknowledge that the capital is now much larger than either the drawing presented by Lucio Costa in 1957 or the listed heritage site from 1987. At the same time as the metropolis has branched out into sprawling peripheries, the periphery has come ever more decidedly to take possession of the center as a place of legitimate appropriation on the part of even those people who cannot afford to live in it. Lucio Costa repositions conceptually the bus station as not only the center of the area sketched in 1957, but as a central link between the core city and the satellite towns:

I should remind that the great bus station platform, with an open view towards the Esplanade, being the link of the so-called Pilot Plan with the so-called satellite towns, has always been understood, precisely, as a point of articulation of the four main blocks that make up the urban center, that is, the “core” of the city. [Emphasis added] (Costa, 1995, p. 311)

CONCLUSION

Can a space of social appropriation be construed by the city dweller in an urban context torn between the void of denial of existing urban form in favor of a theoretical design, and the conceptual and spatial voids of modernity?

The planners’ obsession with the bliss of the beginnings demands the obliteration of all that has existed and, therefore, that has been debased since the creation of the World: it is the sole means of retrieving original perfection. (Eliade, 1966, p. 69)

Since such obliteration is impossible in practical life, a conceptual void, the distance between the mythical origins and reality, is superimposed on the physical void of the bus station platform. Both absences mingle: that of the theoretical ideal, and that of physical determinacy. In this frame of mind, what exists is itself a marker of the absence of what never existed—but also of that which can eventually come into being. Paul Ricoeur (Architecture et narrativité, 1998), following Aristotle, defines absence as a locus of memory. He assumes architecture presents absence, but also makes that which is absent present. At first, absence implies the lack of something that was once present; it is the precedent, the memory of what has been. Beyond this, however, absence also points to that which was never there, therefore the fictional narrative that is a harbinger of promise. Self-consciousness emerges, as it were, from this mythical recounting of what is absent from physical experience (Cassirer, 2004, pp. 297-298).

The bus station platform’s immense void between solid anchors at its northern and southern ends not only frees up space for traffic flow, it frames the views of the urban landscape. It also frames the life stories of passers-by, passengers, bus drivers, street vendors, and other citizens that experience its emptiness on a daily basis. This void is filled by each and every one’s personal activities: waiting for the bus, changing shifts, polishing shoes, smoking (Fig. 3).
Among them the homeless perform their own struggle for appropriation of space and recognition of their presence. This is not a space of prescribed activities and a priori social expectations. The openness of vistas (Fig. 4) itself influences the social appropriation of the bus station’s spaces.

Personal narratives and experiences in the city show the mediation between the concreteness of the actual city and the abstraction of planning, of fiction and of the imagination prefiguring its spaces. The mythical tales of the origins, of heroic deeds, and of a lost golden age are intertwined with fictions being construed on a daily basis. The weave of daily life, even as it converges to a center of collective interaction, is not the mere result of a continuous process dictated ab origines. Lucio Costa himself acknowledged this when confronted with popular appropriation of the platform he had envisaged to be a sophisticated urban square. Thus, mythical narratives spiral out of themselves:

The function of mythical configuration as such is also imbued with [dialectic] and transformed from within. This function can only work if it allows ever new forms to emerge, gradually, out of itself—as objective expressions of the inner and outer worlds, as they present themselves to the outlook of myth. (Cassirer, 2004, p. 392)

These inner and outer worlds meet in architectural space. Self-recognition of the transit passenger is projected against the outer voids as opportunities for supporting it: the simultaneous identities of an
individual having a coffee before boarding the bus and of the same individual recognizing himself as a political citizen before the backdrop of the Esplanade are not mutually exclusive. These social practices—performing and observing—appropriate the void to break free from abstract determinism.

It thus becomes obvious that the configuration of social space is not determined by its mythical original design any more than its actual spatial geometry can entirely determine social life. Holston’s “city defamiliarized” is just as deterministic as the preservationists’ own ideal of the original design. In either case,

... it is difficult to go beyond mythical thinking as long as the prestige of “origins” remains intact and forgetfulness of what took place in illo tempore ... is held to be the main obstacle to knowledge or salvation. (Eliade, 1966, pp. 139-140)

Only, in the preservationists’ mythology the “origin” is an exegesis of Lucio Costa’s Pilot Plan, while in Holston’s mythology it is the ethos of the lost, traditional city street (Holston, 1989, pp. 133-140). Both fail to take into account the transformation that, for Cassirer, springs right out of the mythical structure itself. The void of the bus station configures, on the other hand, a non-deterministic void, a ground form with no definite shape or destination. It is no traditional city street, yet is endowed with all the street life, the supposed inexistence of which Holston all too hastily bemoaned in Brasilia; nor is it a pure expression of the modernist plan, as the preservationists would have it, yet it supports the promises of endless novelty that modernism was meant to bring about. The continuous reconfiguration of memories, promises and the social appropriations that go in between do not preclude mythologies, but presents them in unfamiliarly reconstructed forms. It is in this much stronger and socially dynamic sense that the void defamiliarizes that which is familiar, and thus helps familiarize the unfamiliar.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


¹ That the world should have been created *ex nihilo* as well is nowhere implied in the creation myths of Gn 1-2, Ps CIV, or Jb 38ff., and is merely a possible interpretation of Jn 1, contrary to popular belief.
2 Congressional Bill n. 3751/1960, known after its author, rep. San Tiago Dantas, states in Title III, Article 38, that “Any changes to the Pilot Plan, to which the urbanization of Brasilia obeys, must be authorized by Federal law.” [Emphasis added]