

Brasilia, an archipelago in a sea of space

Brasilia, an old ambition

Rio de Janeiro, September 1956: Juscelino Kubitschek, president of the Brazilian Republic, visits his friend Oscar Niemeyer to ask him to build a new capital. Brazil's desire, expressed many times since 1789, to have its capital transferred from Rio de Janeiro to somewhere situated more centrally to its vast territory, was to be fulfilled this time. Although the project took a long time to achieve because of its ambition, its realisation, on the other hand, was at lightning speed since the capital was officially transferred to Brasilia on 21st April 1960. The seat of government then abandoned Rio's exceptional site for a vast and arid plateau at an altitude of 1000 metres. Lucio Costa was its planner - he won the competition for the pilot plan in March 1957, and Oscar Niemeyer its architect.

Brasilia, a photogenic myth

From the beginning, Brasilia was built like a myth. Andre Malraux saw it as «the first capital of the new civilisation»¹, others as «the first metropolis of the new age of aviation.»² At any rate, descriptions of the town dress Brasilia in the most beautiful finery of fifties' naive modernity. This rise to the rank of myth owes much to the local situation: an emerging country - when Kubitschek came to power in 1956, heavy industry was virtually inexistant — launching itself into a colossal and modernist enterprise. In addition, Le Corbusier went to Brazil and designed a famous planning project for Rio which, although not followed up, contributed towards giving the country an image of being open to modern architectural debate and laid the foundations of the modern, tropical style which has since become its trademark. But concrete construction of the myth of Brasilia is largely based on photography. In fact, even today few people have actually been there and the town's image has, for the most part, been built around the photographs taken of it. These photographs, following the example of publications on Brasilia in architectural magazines, are systematically associated with the same places, consequently always reproducing the same image - in both meanings of the word: the buildings on the square of the Three Powers at the end of the monumental avenue which is lined by rows of ministerial buildings - the dome of the senate, a section of the federal building, the twin towers of the administrative offices and the two palaces, kitsch constructions, of justice and government - are number one in the hit parade of pictures and publications. Of the residential areas, the only one shown in the majority of cases, is the first of the super quadras, those ensembles grouping together housing, shops and local amenities, designed by Oscar Niemeyer himself. Thus an idealised and simplistic image of Brasilia has been created which has little in common with the real townscape. The residential areas by definition are banal and of little interest to the majority of photographers who, like Lucien Herve particularly, prefers the picturesque, formal magnificence of the monuments - quite logically, in some way, in so far as Niemeyer himself consciously followed this picturesque aspect, as he himself explained in 1960: «I wanted these buildings to form a new and different ensemble which would escape the routine into which the architecture of the day threatened, alas! to sink, and that future visitors to the capital would feel surprise and be emotionally moved by them.»³

Emmanuel Pinard: a lasting look

This «feeling of surprise» is part of the search for the architecturally picturesque put into practice by supporters of orthodox, modern architecture. Emmanuel Pinard rejects any form of the picturesque. To the simple description of an «intelligent, correct and magnificent complexity of forms assembled under the light»⁴, he prefers the structural definition of Brasilia's territory. In Paris, empty spaces, disused and derelict areas which he has been photographing tirelessly for more than ten years, are always in the outskirts; in Brasilia, these undefined empty spaces, these wastelands in the true sense, are right in the centre of Lucio Costa's pilot plan, pieces of land within the limits of a town plan which struggles to colonise them. Yet the issue in Brasilia really is about colonising a vast territory, as Costa himself explains: «It is its foundation (of Brasilia) which will eventually give birth to the planned development of the region.

This is about a deliberate act of possession, a sort of land clearance, again relating to the colonial

tradition.»⁵The usual photographs of Brasilia show us this successful colonisation: in the middle of nothing. Man has succeeded in erecting towers and buildings of futuristic design which makes us forget the presence all around us of thousands of kilometres of sparsely-populated land and a series of satellite towns aimed at absorbing the population overflow of a pilot plan limited to 300 000 inhabitants. On the other hand, what Emmanuel Pinard represents in his pictures is the failure of town planning to really plan as extensive an environment in such a natural, sparsely-populated area. Everywhere, or nearly, in his pictures, are the sky - vast, the land - arid, and often the horizon which unites them, as in the pictures in the series NC-NCa of the Montesson plain.⁶

In the great open space which typifies the town of the second half of the xxth century, the public open space of the traditional town can no longer exist, despite the unavailing, relentless efforts of numerous practitioners to keep it alive without really taking local situations into account. The Brasilia landscape shown us in Emmanuel Pinard's images, is based on this impossibility of developing public open space in the traditional meaning of the term. Certainly it is possible to design wide streets in the town centre and to construct islands of relatively dense groups of blocks of flats. But, no sooner has one crossed the edge of the tarmac strip at the side of the road, no sooner has one stepped over the railing of the terrace onto which the building opens, than the red earth of the plateau takes over. The public open space of the dispersed town is the territory itself.

The traditional town, the town in stone, has totally «civilised» its soil by erecting buildings and constructing all over the surface, defined public spaces: pavements, squares, cobbled or tarmacked streets, etc. In this process of urban area taking possession of a previously natural space, the traditional town tends to make its original site totally disappear; its beauty and value are based on this exacerbated artificiality. In Brasilia, as Emmanuel Pinard's pictures show, the original site of the town never disappears due to the dispersal of buildings and development. This tendency towards heavy urban planning gives a feeling at first sight that the townscapes are chaotic. From this point of view Emmanuel Pinard's pictures of Brasilia are very similar to those he has taken of Montesson or the Parisian outskirts, yet these have been taken in areas which have never been subject to such a radical and sophisticated planning process as Brasilia: the dry grasses of Brazil seem to be the same as those of the Parisian outskirts: the mud of Montesson can be seen as if dried out in these pictures of Brasilia shot out of the rainy season; rows of standardised buildings, these too seem very similar.

Territory as a monument

But Emmanuel Pinard's pictures show much more than this superficial chaos. They emphasise the fact that this virgin and uncolonisable territory is the basis of the real monumental dimension of Brasilia. Monuments, as places of permanence and symbolism, are inherent to a town's foundation and existence.⁷ Niemeyer's buildings in Brasilia are claimed to be monuments. But the truly basic, permanent and symbolic element of the essence of this «savanna town»⁸, is the natural land of the vast Brazilian territory. In photographing this presence of the land, Emmanuel Pinard shows us the essential Brasilia: the fact that it constitutes an attempt to colonise a territory which has resisted. As if this sea of virgin space which surrounds Brasilia, under the effect of its pressure, was penetrating the territory of the town itself, from all sides, in the form of creeks, lagoons, fjords and inland seas. The usual pictures of Brasilia show the built islands of this archipelago; Emmanuel Pinard prefers to photograph the changing states of this sea of space. For this reason he has virtually taken no photographs of the main monuments and none at all of the square of the Three Powers. In his photograph of the monumental avenue, the twin towers are so distant that they are part of the landscape without dominating it, in the way that the existence of human figures is expressed more by marks left on the ground than by a real presence in the picture.

And oblique marks from pedestrian feet - those of the poor, those without cars - in these vast expanses, these too arc witness to a form of resistance: justification through usage creeps into the planned environment and resists it, with an intensity equivalent to that of the artist resisting the facility of an architecture which is photogenic.

- 1 Quoted from «Une capitale : Brasilia», L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui n° 91-92, October-November 1960.
- 2 J.O. de Meira. «Au Bresil : la creation d'une capitale», La Construction moderne. n° 2. 1960, P. 43.
- 3 Oscar Niemeyer «Mes experiences a Brasilia», L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui. N° 90. June-July 1960, p. 9.
- 4 Famous definition of architecture according to Le Corbusier, based on a picturesque notion of the assembly of forms, in Le Corbusier, Vers une architecture. Paris Crès (collection), 1923.
- 5 Extract from L. Costa 's report for his town plan, published in L' Architecture d'aujourd'hui, n°80, October-November 1958, p. 51.
- 6 cf. E. Iapierre, «Photographier l'informe», E. Pinard, NC-NCa, Brussels. Arp publications. 2001.
- 7 cf. Aldo Rossi, L'Architecture de la ville, Paris, book and paper, 1990. First edition in Italian in 1966.
- 8 Op. cit, note 2, p.38.