PARADISE LOST

BRASILIA WAS TO BE SOUTH AMERICA’S CITY OF THE FUTURE. INSTEAD IT WAS A DISASTER OF EPIC PROPORTIONS. GREG LINDSAY REPORTS ON THE PAINFUL BIRTH AND THE SLOW DEATH OF THE BRAZILIAN CAPITAL.
Brasilia is artificial – as artificial as the world must have been when it was created,” wrote acclaimed Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector following a visit in 1962, after the new capital had just turned two years old. The instant city had risen from Brazil’s dry inland plateau in 21 feverish months, ahead of schedule in President Juscelino Kubitschek’s campaign promise to deliver “50 years of progress in five”.

The postcard-ready edifices were in place by then – the flying saucers atop the National Congress, the concrete ribs of the Cathedral, the dainty colonnades of Itamaraty Palace – courtesy of architect Oscar Niemeyer, whose teacher, Lucio Costa, had designed the master plan. Costa did away with neighbourhoods – referred to as the Pilot Plan – houses outright in favour of a utopian future, rejecting Brazil’s colonial heritage – Washington D.C. was one – but in Kubitschek’s aim of “a complete break with the past, a possibility to re-create the destiny of the country”. Made-to-order capitals were nothing new by 1956 – Washington D.C. was one – but in rejecting Brazil’s colonial heritage outright in favour of a utopian future, the president and his architects guaranteed their plans would be undone by messy reality.

Today, the original core of Brasilia referred to as the Pilot Plan – houses less than half of its intended 500,000 residents, who in turn represent barely a tenth of the city’s two million residents, most of whom live in the constellation of sprawling satellite cities that began springing up before it was even finished. Despite having been expressly outlawed, Brasilia’s slums managed to pre-date its birth. Brasilia’s failings confound us for another reason: is it even possible to build a city from scratch, at least one most of us would want to live in? Its founding inspired a rash of copycats across the developing world – Yumussukro, Belmopan, Abuja, Astana – but none fired the imagination the way Brasilia did. nor failed so resoundingly. But this may prove to be the defining challenge of the 21st century. Earth’s urban population will nearly double by 2050, requiring the construction of hundreds of new cities. China is already building the equivalent of a Rome every few weeks, and India must add a new Chicago every year to absorb the millions of villagers streaming from the countryside in search of work. The question facing us as an urban species isn’t whether to build cities tabula rasa, but how.

In Brazil’s case, the dream of building a modern capital far inland from soft, tropical Rio de Janeiro – referred to as the Pilot Plan – houses – despite its high failure rate, and street life – in Brasilia, only the landscape would appear. Lispector imagined, owed by the inhuman scale of the place. “The two architects who planned Brasilia were not interested in creating something beautiful. That would be too simple: they created their own terror; and left that terror unexplained. Creation is not an understanding. It is a new mystery.”

The mystery confronting visitors 50 years later is why its creators ever thought Brasilia would succeed – not just in overturfing 5,000 years of urbanism, but in Kubitschek’s aim of “a complete break with the past, a possibility to re-create the destiny of the country”. Made-to-order capitals were nothing new by 1956 – Washington D.C. was one – but in rejecting Brazil’s colonial heritage outright in favour of a utopian future, the president and his architects guaranteed their plans would be undone by messy reality.

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to live as if in the sphere of one big family, in perfect social coexistence,” according to a glowing official report.

In reality, Holston found Brasília’s early residents were traumatised by the move from Rio and São Paulo, a condition they dubbed brasílite, meaning “Brasíl(ia)-itis” — the low-level depression one suffers when daily life has been stripped of the small pleasures they’d left behind. Some residents fought back — shopkeepers struggled to move their storefronts back to the street, or at least curbside — while others simply opted out. Rejecting Niemeyer’s utopian aims, some senior bureaucrats built palatial homes on the far side of Brasília’s artificial lake, and the ones who remained were re-assigned apartments by seniority and rank after the military came to power in 1964.

The architects had faced a paradox from inception — while their city would transform Brazil in splendid isolation, building it required the exploitation of the same divisions they were trying so hard to erase. Kubitschek made construction of the Pilot Plan his top priority. Almost immediately, thousands of labourers — eventually more than 60,000 — began working in terrible conditions to realise the seemingly lighter-than-air structures sketched by Niemeyer. It was not uncommon for men to be crushed by concrete or torn apart by snapped steel rods.

The architect Sergio Ferro — who at the time was a student designing apartment blocks under Niemeyer — would later in life admit to being horrified and disillusioned by the gap between rhetoric and reality: “We had to modify Brazil, all with a very beautiful social perspective.”
he wrote in his memoirs. ‘But, on arriving there, I saw those beautiful sketches by Niemeyer, whites, purest of pure, but a mass of people highly miserable, highly exploited, building that. It was an enormous contrast to see how architecture was produced: our design, theoretically charged with the best of intentions, was carried out under the worst conditions. This had broken our dream of architecture.’

Living conditions were just as bad. To accommodate the tens of thousands of candangos (a derisive nickname Holston describes as meaning ‘vagabond lower-class lowbrow’) working on site full time, a camp called Cidad Livre, the ‘Free City’ was erected several miles away. Primarily composed of shacks, the Free City was equal parts Wild West boomtown (as Niemeyer liked to think of it) and the worst favelas, with no running water, rampant disease, and workers prone to suicide — as Ferro later attested.

The Free City’s very existence posed a challenge to the Pilot Plan. To prevent favelas from forming on the city’s periphery, as they had done in Rio, any informal settlements ‘should at all costs be prevented’, Costa had warned. The legislation authorising Brasília had placed a cap on residents at 500,000, and neither Niemeyer nor Costa planned to expand the city beyond the Pilot Plan and its greenbelt. The Free City would be demolished upon the city’s completion, its residents either sent home or resettled on the farms planned for the hinterlands. In other words: if all else failed, social inequality in Brasília would simply be outlawed.

Things did not go as planned. In 1958, midway through construction, several thousand refugees from a fierce drought arrived at the Free City in search of work. Turned away by security forces, they dug in instead, naming their encampment ‘Vila Sara Kubitschek’ after the president’s
wife, spreading the rumour that “by order of dona Sara”, anyone staking a plot there would be granted legal title to the land. The strategy worked — thousands of workers flooded the site, while hamstringing the government’s ability to clear them. Out of options, Kubitschek authorised the construction of a satellite city 25km from the Pilot Plan as an alternative to the land grab. In a matter of days, 4,000 settlers and their shacks were transported to the satellite city, named Taguatinga — which today has more residents than the half-empty Pilot Plan. A second satellite city would follow six months later: today there are more than a dozen of significant size. The Pilot Plan was finished on time for its 1960 inaugural, first earning worldwide acclaim and later ridicule — and sometimes both at the same time. “Only in the Soviet Union would I have thought such a thing possible!” the French statesman André Malraux said upon its inauguration – a backhanded compliment at best. Kubitschek would leave office a year later, after refusing to sign the legislation guaranteeing the Free City’s continued existence. He would end up in exile following the military
Instead of overturning Brazilian society, the Pilot Plan came to embody the worst aspects of it. The Pilot Plan, in the words of one critic, has become “a historic urban fragment, maintained for largely sentimental and symbolic reasons.” It is also the wealthy core of the megalopolis, while poorer residents commute from the satellite cities — several of which have become quite successful in the manner of São Paulo: privately developed and sprawling several hours each way through the greenbelt’s empty fields, which cannot be filled in following the designation of the Pilot Plan as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987. It is, by order of a United Nations decree, frozen in time. “A city cannot be a work of art,” wrote Jane Jacobs in The Death And Life Of Great American Cities, published the year after Brasília’s inauguration. History has proven her right.

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