HARD AND SOFT REVISITED

Frederico de Holanda

ABSTRACT

In the postscript to The Social Logic of Space Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson argue that modernism in urban space presents two versions, both coherent with power relations in contemporary societies: hard and soft. The former invests in continuity and density of the urban fabric but with a proliferation of barriers resulting in labyrinthine schemes typical of housing estates. The latter invests in distances, discontinuities, sprawl. Brazil’s Federal Capital, Brasília, presents both versions, but in different functional and social areas. In this paper, an attempt is made to depict them from the very city’s inception. Over time, the hard version became predominant in satellite dormitory nuclei, regardless of income levels. Gated communities are the general mode of urban expansion in Brasília today, both in low-rise and high-rise versions – skyscrapers which mark the skyline at a distance from the Pilot Plan, the urban nucleus originally designed by Lucio Costa. The “Plan” (for short, as it became in usual speech) is marked by the generous greenery of this “park city”, the residential buildings located amidst densely (re)forested areas, both constituting the famous Brasília’s “superblocks”. This was an original residential scheme, although inspired by Le Corbusier’s unités d’habitación but departing from them in important traits. However, Costa attempted – or so he reckoned – to rescue some attributes of “traditional” cities in some “sectors” of his blueprint. The tools “to think with” of modernism were, though, too powerful to be ignored. Such “traditional” areas are nothing like the fabric we find in Brazilian vernacular cities, and we do not have to travel far to check this: the small town of Planaltina (19th century) survived within the borders of the newly delimited territory of the “futuristic” municipality. Although demonized by some critics, it is argued here that, in terms of the quality of life in public spaces – read this as co-presential patterns – the soft and the hard modernistic versions that we witness in Brasília are not equivalent in the damage they have done to the cityscape. The hard version parallels the death of life in public spaces. The soft version of Costa’s design, true enough, cannot be compared with Copacabana (Rio) – or Oxford St. (London) for that matter. Still, it teems with life and is accordingly highly praised by inhabitants.

KEYWORDS

Brasília, Modern city, Satellite Nuclei, Urban History

Frederico de Holanda, Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo, Universidade de Brasília, Brasília, Campus Darcy Ribeiro, Asa Norte, 70910-900, Brazil, fredholanda44@gmail.com
1. INTRODUCTION

Brazil’s “modernistic” Federal Capital is celebrating, on April 21st 2019, 59 years of its inauguration as the seat of Federal Government, which moved from Rio de Janeiro to the Central Plateau of the territory. Why inverted commas? Praised as perhaps the most important manifestation of the Modern Movement in Architecture at city scale, Brasilia’s configuration by far surpasses orthodoxy. Its baroque perspectives and monumentality were anathema to modern theorists, some of whom having seen in the blueprint a manifestation of “decaying formalism” (Frampton, 1980). Lucio Costa’s proposal also presents other traits which, being inspired by urbanistic trends of the time – late 1950’s – include, nevertheless, some heterodoxies: the neighbourhood unit is not inward looking, as was the canon, there are traces of “main streets” in local shopping areas, demographic densities are lower and high-rise buildings are limited to the urban core and absent from the residential tissue, in contrast with Le Corbusier’s unités d’habitation, which were about thrice in height etc.

This does not prevent Jan Gehl’s acid remarks:

> When I was a student, Brasilia was considered the ideal city. It was fantastic from a plane, designed in the shape of a big eagle, with the head being the parliament building. It was beautiful! Especially if you travel in helicopter you can see the government buildings designed by Niemeyer, you can see huge blocks. In helicopter it’s great, but down below where people live, Brasilia is shit (Gehl, 2017).

Taking a stance from the discipline of anthropology, James Holston is no less critical:

> In Brasilia, the outdoor city public of other Brazilian cities has all but disappeared. (...) Social life oscillates unremittingly between work and residence. (...) Hence, the overwhelming sense of monotony and sameness that Brasilienses experience in the city (Holston, 1989).

Among other things, this paper is a rebut to such statements. The authors above refer to Costa’s Plan; I will include it, but will refer to the actual city today, i.e. the one constituted by the totality of the urban fabric of the municipality, which goes far beyond Costa’s ideas – and ideals. True, the Capital was supposed to develop through satellite nuclei, maintaining the “physiognomy” of the original Pilot Plan (henceforth Plan for short) unstained: the Plan, as the metropolitan core, should be forever clearly identifiable in the landscape, in contrast with whatever would constitute its further developments beyond a rigorously preserved green belt. This remains to date. And yet, in the city as a whole, we witness something like a palimpsest more akin to cities centuries old than to a Capital designed from scratch and implemented on no man’s land from 1957 onwards – other nicknames are “morphological mosaic” (Kohlsdorf and Kohlsdorf, 2017) and “patchwork city” (Medeiros, 2013; Medeiros and Holanda, 2007), both conveying similar ideas. (There were two small urban nuclei, one dating from the 1850’s, the other from the 1930’s, to which I shall return.)
If Costa’s Plan was open to heterodoxies vis-à-vis the Modern Movement, more diversified still would be the “patches of the quilt” that has unevenly covered the territory of the Federal District (which coincides with the Municipality of Brasilia), Costa’s Plan having become one of its boroughs, admittedly the most important symbolically and economically. I will not dwell upon the patches in detail in this paper, but rather focus on the title’s dichotomy: with some minor inconsistencies, we witness today the “soft” urban design of Costa’s Plan in contrast with the “hard” solution of both the low-rise and the high-rise gated communities around it (norms prevent fencing off areas in the Plan’s area), plus solutions which locate in between.

Hard and soft strategies are typical trends of urban space in contemporary cities, as put forward by Bill Hillier and Julienne Hanson in the postscript to The Social Logic of Space (1984). The former invests in continuity and density of the urban fabric but with a proliferation of barriers resulting in labyrinthine schemes typical of housing estates. The latter invests in distances, discontinuities, sprawl. The authors argue that both are coherent with the social structure of contemporary societies, and that, if they differ in configuration, they converge in the pernicious effects they have in sociability. In a later paper, Hillier has exemplified par excellence the hard trend, as he studied Islington housing estates, London (Hillier, 1996, esp. Chapter 5) and the impact that urban transformations have had on moving and static people in streets: a well-integrated open street layout with buildings opening directly onto public space has been replaced by a quasi-labyrinthine scheme in which short segments, frequent changes in direction and blind walls abound. Pre- and post-renovation patterns of people in open space contrast sharply: whereas in the pre-renovated area spaces were mixed-use concerning gender and generations, a clear specialised use of space emerged in the post-renovated situation, in which there appeared places with large predominance of women or children.

The soft trend has also been explored by the Modern Movement, but now low densities, sparseness, proliferation of voids and large distances are the case. Likewise, proliferation of barriers – the common element in both – but in the latter case they are formed by discontinuities rather than by blind walls and frequent twists and turns. This is the trend preferred in the design of English garden cities. In Gordon Cullens’ book cover to The Concise Townscape (1971) a gentleman “draws” something like a pre-modern city fabric on the pavement of what is clearly a huge span of open public space in one of such instances. If they differ in configuration, both damage dense, informal, daily, secular encounter systems. Mutatis mutandis, in fiction literature, in the amazing short story The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths the great Argentinian poet Jorge Luís Borges (1986) has called the hard solution the “labyrinth of walls” and the soft solution the “labyrinth of the desert”. The analogy is mine, not his, but the description of both is so precise – and their consequences – that it looks as if he was talking about modern urban design and Hillier and Hanson’s two trends.

But why so? Why two apparently so distinct formal options have their say in modern architecture? Because, Hillier and Hanson suggest, both contribute to the workings of the strongly hierarchical social forms of capitalism: while the hard trend responds to the needs of the forces of capitalist
production, strengthening the extraction of surplus value in the production of city space, soft solutions invest in the reproduction of social ties – read this as *weakening* of social ties – which are a… precondition to the production of surplus value… Planners have long been fooling themselves by appearances, thinking highly of themselves as revolutionaries while designing “soft ambiences”, while in fact they have been acting in another dimension of the same status quo. (I hope Hillier and Hanson will forgive my strong words, for this is not a literal reading of their text.)

In this paper I revisit these seminal ideas. Some say Brasília is too young to be assessed as the appropriation of its space is concerned – the city still has no “history”, six decades is much less than infancy in urban life. I try otherwise: test Hillier and Hanson’s ideas by confronting them with daily life in public spaces of the Capital, as well as in special occasions, when tens of thousands of people have occupied street lanes, pavements, lawns, and which have intensified in the last few years. But let us go back a bit in the argument. First, I start from the picture of the city I have drawn circa twenty years ago, in *Exceptional Space* (available in the web in the 2011 edition). The work explores settlement architecture mainly as a *dependent* variable: the aim is to establish relations between places separated among themselves by a huge span of both space and time, and to enquire whether affinities might be drawn among such apparently so diverse sites as Mayan Ceremonial Centres, Zulu Warriors’ kraals, Feudal Castles and a modern Capital, as determined by similar social forces at work. And, secondly, I explore Brasília as a contemporary ethnographer, peripatetically wandering about a sample of the most telling sites of the municipality, covering as much as possible the varied patches of the quilt we find here, the images of which formed the basis for the documentary film *Brasilia: Symphony of a Capital*. But now space is seen as an *independent* variable, I thus work within a “post-determination” framework: the boomerang that was once launched by determining social forces is hitting the subjects back in ways which were largely unforeseen – or weren’t they? The question then becomes: ok, this is here and now, let us suspend *causes*: how does the place affect people?

In fact, this is just an analytical trick: analysing architecture through its determinations or through its effects results from a rational abstraction which places the reasoning at a certain point of the virtuous circle of design, or, for that matter the virtuous circle of any human agency, as Giddens puts it (1986): we are dealing with a continuous process of design/implementation/critique/re-design etc., in something which should be understood as a conjecture-test process (Hillier, 1996, especially Chapter 11). Figure 1 illustrates the idea.

*Exceptional Space* dealt with the upper part of the circle, my later writings have been dealing with the lower bit (e.g. Holanda, 2007, 2010, 2011b). This will be the focus of this paper. I will try to unravel, as much as the current status of the research allows it, the results of the diverse configurational patches of the quilt on people, by identifying the differential influence that hard and soft trends have on subjects, particularly on their co-presence patterns in space, in the periphery and in the metropolitan core – the Pilot Plan.
2. EXCEPTIONAL SPACE

I have moved to Brasília in 1972, coming from Rio de Janeiro. My first essays naturally confronted the intense public life on Rio’s streets with the calm, to say the least, of Brasília’s public space. The essays concerned the urban core, which amazed newcomers particularly because of its archipelago-like configuration: sectors were not only specialised by use – banks, hotels, offices – but were also strongly separated among themselves by express roads, huge parking lots, differences in level, lack of “active façades” etc. An “architecture of additions”, to use the expression of the Chilean architect Rodrigo Peres de Arce (2015), to fill in voids and establish a minimum continuity among such “islands” was something which first came to one’s “urbanite” mind.

However, it was a trip to Mexico in the end of 1975, while visiting the archaeological site of Teotihuacán, that has made a great impact on my vision of Brasília and of architecture in general. The strong similarities, physical and semantical – i.e. the configuration of spaces and buildings, and the social labels attached to them (Holanda, 2017) – between the so-called Avenue of the Dead (nobody knows its original name), in Teotihuacán, and the Esplanade of Ministries, in Brasília, have stricken me most. Both are long axial spaces, with the same length – 2,000 m long – and harbouring only super-structural labels of the social order – governmental, religious, cultural. My first thought was: I am in an AD 8th century Brasília! Following from that, the apparent similarity has resulted, first in my MSc thesis and then in my PhD dissertation, Exceptional Space (published initially in Portuguese, 2002, and then in English, 2011a), and the research hypothesis was: there had to be some similar social determination which brought together the two types of sites, underneath “cosmetic” differences in materials, construction systems, physical dimensions and form of individual buildings etc. And the research question: what was it?
It turned out that similar solutions had occurred in other places and times in history, and that the corresponding social formations had attributes in common: a special relation between infrastructural and super-structural dimensions of social order, by which strong separations of agents in space and time set apart subjects related to one or the other: there were clearly “economic” agents, on the one hand, and an almost pure “symbolic class”, which did not mingle with production, on the other. In societies with more developed processes of division of labour, as today’s Brazil, such cleavage revealed itself in terms of a strong State cut off from a fragile civil society underneath it (Faoro, 1958).

Physical strategies for enhancing such separation took several forms historically, but for what matters here they could be either hard or soft. Around Mayan ceremonial centres, “barriers” were distances among widely scattered structures in the landscape – therefore a soft strategy; in a Warrior’s Zulu kraal, as in a Feudal Castle, the barrier was a real enough wall which fenced off the building from the surrounding countryside; in Imperial Beijing, concentrating walls defined successive environments hierarchically positioning vis-à-vis the city around, to which determinate social categories might have access in accordance with their position in the social structure – in the three latter cases, therefore, the hard strategy prevailed. In all cases, strong rules of access to such exceptional spaces were established, depending either on the permanent social position held by subjects, or on the non-permanent social role people might eventually perform, e.g. as family heads transmuted temporarily into ceremonial officials during the religious Mayan calendar, or as adult males while strongly capable as warriors, among the Zulu.

Costa’s Plan for Brasília invests in both strategies, but the soft way clearly predominates – huge empty spaces, long distances, stand-alone buildings, semantic specialization. However, how does the historical “separation game” show in daily life as well as in special occasions? How does this apply to the “class structure of advanced societies” – which is the case – to use Giddens’ expression (1973)? Do hard and soft manifest differently at the metropolitan core as compared to the distant periphery?

3. HARD

Brasília’s “morphological mosaic” is varied indeed, its types of fractions listed as follows in approximate chronological order: two pre-modern urban nuclei, one dating from the 1850’s (Planaltina), the other from the 1930’s (Brazlândia); remains of contractors’ camps; remains of favelas (slums) which have almost completely disappeared; distant planned satellite nuclei, largely based on modernistic principles, but without the rich investment in the quality of public space and urban facilities that exist in the Plan – health, education, leisure etc.; low-rise (the majority) and high-rise gated communities, which cut across income layers and which have recently spread throughout the municipality’s territory; finally, the “noble” bit, Costa’s Pilot Plan and its immediate surroundings, which have been declared World Cultural Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1987.

The two pre-modern urban nuclei present the typical configuration of Brazilian vernacular towns across the country: a reasonably regular (orthogonal) street layout, buildings without frontal or lateral
setbacks constituting a clearly defined, strongly constituted by doors and windows, and continuous street space (Figure 2 shows 19th century Planaltina), mixed use implying lack of semantic specialization, special outstanding edifices (e.g. churches) which contrast with the rest through volumetric attributes and generous space around them. In such cases, modern strategies – hard and soft – have been limited to expansion areas (the original towns have increased enormously in population since the 1950’s). In the “historical bits” (i.e. pre-modern), built densities are low, the flow of people in the streets is constant and varied, albeit in small numbers.

Figure 2. 19th century Planaltina, within the borders of the current municipality of Brasília

The poorest region is to the opposite extreme of the city: Sol Nascente [Raising Sun], considered the biggest favela in Latin America (circa 100,000 inhabitants) presents an open street layout, but the contrast with Planaltina (above) could hardly be greater (Figure 3). You simply do not see the buildings, hidden behind high walls which stretch the whole span of plot fronts – streets are open air tunnels in between brick or makeshift metal barriers. There is high unemployment, record levels of criminality and no public facilities – health, education, culture etc. The State is absent and social relations are managed by criminal gangs (“factions”) which enlist unemployed youths to their “services” (drug dealing) and “protect” their associates. The rest survive as they can. Sidewalks are inexistent and there is no asphalt – red dust swirls around the few people that adventure themselves in the open air. “Eyes of the streets”, the famous expression of Jane Jacobs’ (1961) = zero. They would not help anyway: very poor correlations have been found in a thorough survey of criminality carried out in Brasília between offenses and local or global syntactic properties (Ferraz, 2017, Ferraz and Holanda, 2019). In certain areas a curfew is imposed by factions from early hours in the evening.

The odd ethnographer feels unsafe while strolling along the open-air tunnels, the inhabitant knows he is unsafe. As high walls protect the houses from people jumping over them, crime is “exported” to public spaces (notwithstanding crime as a “family business” – often domestic violence against women and youth); and when police surveillance is eventually strengthened in the streets, crime is exported elsewhere. Consistent relations with architecture are nihil. In this place, we may speak of a hard architectural solution, but not in the sense dealt with so far: strong barriers do not encompass a set of buildings, or correspond to a particular building of a determinate character, but are pervasive as defining the interface of each and every building vis-à-vis public space (notwithstanding small local shopping areas). This is not the space of the vernacular Brazilian city, nor of the traditional favela (where buildings and plots are most permeable amongst themselves, let alone with public space), even
less so of the “modern”. A new animal was given birth, one which is being replicated in many other areas of the municipality. We may thus speak of a “local hard” strategy, instead of a “global hard” one – which I have referred to above.

Figure 3. Sol Nascente favela

There are essentially two versions of the hard trend in Brasília, plus a minor variant: the low- and the high-rise gated communities, and the labyrinthine street system of two satellite nuclei. Consider first the gated communities.

In average, low-rise schemes are mainly inhabited by middle-low or low-income layers, high-rise schemes by upper ones. Middle class or working class gated communities spread all over Brasília’s periphery and they are by far the new pattern of urban expansion, but there are also enclaves in central areas. Coelho (2017) has completed the most comprehensive axial map of the municipality of Brasília so far, based on data from 2015, resulting a map with 164,189 axial lines, or 299,669 street segments, encompassing urban and rural areas. (The axial map, in this case considering possible vehicular movement, results from technical procedures of Space Syntax Theory: it abstracts the street system in terms of the minimum set of straight lines that cover all potential accesses; the segment map is a development of the axial map and is based in line stretches between crossings.) Coelho revealed that the number of segments with restricted access, i.e. which belong to some sort of segregated scheme – hard strategy therefore – amount to 52% of the total. Brasília is already predominantly hard (COELHO and MEDEIROS, 2019).

The location of gated communities varies from circa 20 km to more than 45 km away from city core. A wall surrounds the set of houses, punctured by a single entrance – rarely more than one. The “wall” may be a transparent iron fence with beautiful flowers, but still is a blind barrier towards public space (Figure 4). Considering the houses, as in Sol Nascente, crime is exported elsewhere, homes themselves are safe, in contrast with boroughs in which there is an open street system. Public space is desolate, public transit is almost non-existent or a regular time-table is an unfulfilled dream, people in the streets in between walls are servants to the houses inside, walking to and from bus stops, except for the odd inhabitant who cannot afford driving a car daily (he may have one for leisure trips, visits on week-ends etc.). Along the artery roads something like a bit of a “main street” may develop, to which almost everyone drives a car. The awful quality of sidewalks stresses vehicular priority.
In a case-study carried out by Vianna (2005), inhabitants were asked about the first reason for moving to the gated communities. Safety is a declared factor – and they prove right as far as their individual house is concerned – but is not granted a privileged position: it comes in fourth, with 11% of quotations, after the preference for living in a spacious house, 35% (they moved from flats), economic reasons, 24% (many moved from expansive Pilot Plan, in which 38% paid rents), and “tranquillity”, 17%. Desire for communal relationships supposedly enhanced by the absence of non-local passers-by remains a myth, once more refuting Oscar Newman’s (1973) territorial nightmares, as Hillier (1973) did in a classic essay shortly after the launching of Newman’s book: relationships among neighbours are granted a third place (11%), coming after relatives (56%) and workmates (21%) (Vianna, 2005).

In middle-class cases, social relationships occur transpatially, as they did previously, before families migrated from flats in the Plan, the sort of social interactions which are, seemingly anywhere in Planet Earth, typical of upper social layers (Holanda, 2011a).

In Brasilia, high-rise gated communities concentrate in the borough of Águas Claras [Clear Waters], the skyline of which reminds us of all but “bucolic” Costa’s Plan (Figure 5). Income is much higher than in the average previous cases, and each “condominium” is much better equipped with various sorts of leisure, sports and cultural facilities. Public squares have all but vanished – some attempts have been erased from the map for “misbehaviour” of its users, which were considered a nuisance by neighbours. There remain only those “squares” inside walls.
Proceedings of the 12th Space Syntax Symposium

Gross residential densities are quite high, amounting to 215 inhab./hec., but this does not result in people in public open spaces – a clear instance to illustrate that high densities may be a pre-condition to presence, but it is not a determining factor, there is much more at stake, and in the case of Águas Claras, configuration plays a fundamental role. We have here a “hard over hard” scheme: plots are shut off from streets by high walls (Figure 6) and sets of plots are ordained in cul-de-sac schemes, morphologically preventing non-locals from passing by – the typical Newman’s strategy. Public space is thus deserted, bar the local shopping areas, to which, again, locals have access predominantly by car.

![Figure 6. Águas Claras. High-rise gated communities](image)

The minor hard variation concerns two satellite nuclei, Guará and Gama. They are the closest thing we have in Brasília to the Islington housing estates commented upon by Hillier (1996): short street segments, abundant “T” and “L” junctions that result in frequent twists and turns (Figure 7), blind walls all over the place, concentration of shops in clearly delimited (and deeply located) parts of the territory. We couldn’t be closer to Borges’ “labyrinth of walls”. The most integrated lines of the axial map are arterial roads for cars and are deployed along residential blocks, but which turn their blind backs to such roads (Figure 8). No wonder they are deserted of pedestrians.

4. SOFT

The territory of the Federal District, which coincides with that of the Municipality of Brasília, is divided into 31 Administrative Regions (RAs). The perimeter that circumscribes the World Cultural Heritage Site encompasses the RA-1 (“Brasília”), and three other RAs, but only the former is the subject matter of this section, henceforth simply referred to as “Brasília” – this was essentially the object of the national competition launched in 1956, of which Lucio Costa was the winner (the result was made public in March, 1957) (Figure 9).
Figure 7. Guará. General plan

Figure 8. Guará. The most integrated street is defined by blind walls

Figure 9. The World Cultural Heritage Site: the approximate triangle in the centre of the image, limited by the lake, to the right, and by the thoroughfare to the left
A detailed appraisal of Brasília is published in many instances, including the Proceedings of International Space Syntax Symposia, too many and too varied to be quoted here. In this paper I will thus skip a thorough description of the city and rather concentrate on the use of its open public space, while it relates to the hard/soft dichotomy in modern urbanistic strategy.

It has been incorporated by social discourse, imported from academia, that Brasília’s urban fabric is organised into four “scales”: monumental, gregarious, residential and bucolic, terms which, over time, have been adopted by Costa himself (as such, he did not use them in his foundational text on the city [Costa, 1995]). Take this to define urban morphological types – which boil down to boroughs – and we are close to a good enough classification of the types of places we find here. There are common attributes among them, as well as specificities. Stand-alone buildings are a general trait, which go hand in hand with generous open spaces densely vegetated. Costa is right in nicknaming his project “park city”: greenery is perhaps the word that first comes to mind to describe the city’s identity. Still, variation in size and form of open spaces and built volumes – and their relations – clearly differentiate the four types of places.

The distinguishing feature of Brasília’s residential space are the “superblocks” (Figure 10). It is the basic, say, urban elementary unit, a square area measuring circa 250 m x 250 m, considering the peripheral pedestrian walk. Inside, the residential free-standing buildings are in general six stories high plus pilotis. Besides, there are the kindergarten; the school for the six first years of the Fundamental Educational Cycle; a newsstand. The rest is freely accessible open space, including a playground and a multi-functional sports court. Altogether, built volumes occupy circa 15% of the area, whereas in pre-modern urban tissues enclosed plots plus free-standing edifices usually surpass 50% – in 19th century Planaltina, for example, they reach 68% (Holanda, 2011a). Thus, soft strategy indeed; net residential densities, i.e. if we consider only the space inside the superblock, are in average 200 inhab./hec., but gross residential densities fall drastically to 16 inhab./hec in RA-1, for this includes all other uses, the generous street system and non-aedificandi areas, which abound.

However, there are always moving or static people around, the numbers and variety of which change along the hours of the day and the days of the week: young kids use the play-ground, accompanied by parents or nannies; adolescents sit in groups, chatting; various ages use the sports courts; jogging
adults stroll around, play in the courts or participate in Tai Chi sessions early in the morning; groups meet in tables and chairs in shaded areas to play cards or dominoes; families or groups of friends have a night meal in makeshift open air restaurants, supported by food-trucks, which occupy empty parking spaces in the evenings; peripatetic fairs – a certain day of the week for a certain superblock – sell food or craftsmanship items; the newsstand is always a meeting point etc. (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Superblocks’ open space use

Acquaintances amongst neighbours may unfold into friendships but this is more common in early age – as with my kids, who grew up in a superblock and rarely stayed indoors at their free time. Adults entertain their relationships transpatially, as is typical of middle classes – for this is par excellence a high middle-class environment (the third richest city’s RA), with small variations towards upper or lower levels, depending essentially on the apartment building type, which impinges upon differential market value. I have lived before in strongly “urban” environments in Rio and Recife, and my relationships have always been as transpatial as they are since I moved to Brasília. And as I have shown elsewhere (Holanda, 2007), it is the local properties of buildings that define real estate prices in Brasília, not global properties, which, in Space Syntax jargon means attributes of localizations vis-à-vis the city at large. Thus, it is the (high) real state value of superblocks’ flats that are a source of socio-spatial stratification, thus making the Pilot Plan predominantly a middle-class – not working-class – environment. In this extremely top-down design strategic, many “noises” – e.g. land use
regulations defining commerce in less accessible locations – prevent the “law of natural movement” (Hillier, 1996) from realising itself, by which the most (topologically) physically accessible urban axes would attract more people, and thus attract central activities, which in turn would attract more people etc., in a “virtuous circle of urbanity”. If there is a problem with the superblocks, this is it: the small (local) variation in domestic space types results in quasi-homogeneous (and high) prices that are inaccessible to most people.

The superblock and its flats are highly praised by Brasília’s inhabitants, contradicting critical discourses as Holston’s and Gehl’s, but also classical statements as Jane Jacobs’. There are no “streets” or “squares” or “blocks” as clearly defined morphological units, or “eyes of the streets”, let alone street “active façades” – perhaps the most fashionable dictum of contemporary urbanists. However, this is not a problem: it does not affect the visual pleasure people enjoy, nor conviviality or safety. Superblocks feel safe and are safe, again contradicting discourses as Rykwert’s (2000), according to whom high officials have abandoned the flats in the superblocks fleeing from crime and moved to single-family housing schemes by the lake-shore. In fact, the opposite holds true: as criminal offenses are higher in the latter borough (Ferraz, 2017), the richest area in the Federal District, people are moving back to the superblocks, further increasing prices here. Besides the borough by the lakeshore, offenses concentrate in 1) areas with high number of pedestrians, as in the urban core, and 2) in parking lots with little surveillance, as in the club sector by the lakeshore or at the University of Brasilia’s campus. Thus, “unsafeness”, disappearance of “city public of other Brazilian cities”, and “the overwhelming sense of monotony and sameness” (Holston) boil down to sheer wishful thinking.

Local expressive and practical qualities attract local people to the open spaces, but there is an important contribution of through-movement, particularly in the east-west direction: important magnets – services, bus stops, metro stations – are located towards east and west, and the overall permeability allows people to choose the most convenient path the connect them, eventually through the superblock’s interior space. Remember gross densities in Águas Claras are more than ten times higher – 16 inhab./hec. in the Plan and 215 inhab./hec in Águas Claras – but the deserted spaces are in the latter, not the former.

For sure, Brasília’s superblocks are nothing like Copacabana, Rio. The latter is perhaps the most “urbane” borough in the world, if by such we understand a place with an enormous variety of people and services for all social layers, both as residents and visitors. Its 150,000 inhabitants, a high gross residential density of 280 inhab./hec, very close to Manhattan’s, the huge amount of services, plus the famous beach, result in the strong polarization it exerts over the whole city. You do not need to cross the street to fulfil all your needs – as goes the popular saying. No wonder the high pedestrian flows in daily life, even on secondary streets, and the record gatherings on special occasions: 1,000,000 people in the Rolling Stones show, 2,000,000 to watch the famous fireworks every New Year’s Eve, 3,500,000 people in a mass by Pope Francis…
But it is inadequate to use the same yardstick to measure – and assess – people in Brasília’s superblocks’ open space. Indicators often refer to axes along which some measures are taken: number of doors, number of windows, built continuity, setbacks etc., referring to linear metres of street length. Such axial measures do not apply in Brasília for a simple fact: there are no axes, as there are axes perceptually identifiable in pre-modern Planaltina. Soft strategies simply abolish them in favour of stand-alone buildings in the greenery; permeability is radicalised (you may almost walk along straight lines in any direction), there is simply no differentiation in integration measure in syntactic-axial terms – space is axially undifferentiated, as far as pedestrian movements are concerned in the internal domain of the superblock (for the vehicle, it is another story). The analytical break down of the open space system of a superblock into elementary units has to take into account other procedures, e.g. isovists or convex analysis (two other techniques adopted in Space Syntax, depicting two-dimensional morphological units in plan, not one-dimensional, as in axial analysis). Preliminary results suggest it is the size, form and location of such units, plus their landscape design, and other spatial attributes – sun/shade, benches, sounds/silence, ponds, flowers, scents, air movement and temperature on our bodies’ comfort zone the whole year round in the privileged weather conditions of the central plateau – that convey the sense of pleasure and convenience residents report on, and attract their presence (Ribeiro, 2013). Soft strategy indeed, but we are far from the would-be set of Corbusian gigantic unités d’habitation lost in the landscape. Lucio Costa has conceived another scale altogether.

The monumental “scale”, or type, or, better still, borough contrasts sharply with the residential superblocks, although belonging to the same soft strategy. The Monumental Axis, particularly the stretch of the Esplanade of Ministries, is the most famous bit of Costa’s Plan, the one most powerfully symbolic, the one that confers the city its identity as the National Capital (Figure 12). No other entry of the competition proposed something similar – all others were strictly modern in the sense that they refused to employ monumentality, in the governmental areas or elsewhere.

Figure 12. Monumental Axis, the stretch of the Esplanade of Ministries
Curiously enough, it was also here that Costa was ambiguous vis-à-vis modern design. Yes, the soft strategy is constituted by free-standing buildings, the famous “sculptural” edifices designed by Oscar Niemeyer in his most “classic” period: Metropolitan Cathedral, ministerial parallelepipeds, National Congress, Planalto Palace (presidential headquarters), Supreme Court, Ministry of Justice, and, primus inter pares, the Itamaraty Palace (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) (Holanda, 2011b). However, they define, more than anywhere else in the city, two clearly configured open space morphological units: the first, the lawn surrounded by the ministries and the Congress, plus, in its western extreme, the Bus Station; the second, the Three Powers Plaza, defined also by the Congress, to the west, and by the Planalto Palace, to the north, and Supreme Court, to the south. (As a three-sided plaza, it reminds us of Praça do Comércio, Lisbon, and Praça XV, Rio.) Do not expect the “cohesion” Camillo Sitte comments on (Sitte, 1986), while he refers to classic squares in Europe, i.e. the contiguity of built volumes clearly circumscribing open space; and yet, the Esplanade, 2,000 m x 320 m, and the Plaza, 300 m x 300 m, could hardly be more legible. A comparison with Chandigarh’s Capitol is extremely telling, in which the composition is ordained through abstract axes, not through perceptible, real space (Holanda and Medeiros, 2012). Le Corbusier was indeed modern, Lucio Costa, not that much…

Mary Douglas could not have been righter when she writes: “greater space means more formality” (1970). The Esplanade of Ministries, the dimensions of which bring it closer indeed to pre-Columbian Teotihuacán – the same precise length of 2,000 m – is suitable for anything but instrumental, daily life. Indeed, the latter was never its declared aim: it was the embodiment of expressive qualities that successfully made it a powerful symbol of the Nation, or harbour big events on ceremonial occasions.

Globally and locally the Esplanade’s configuration conspires against the presence of people in open spaces, as a wide body of evidence suggests (see the International Space Syntax Symposia and, particularly in the Brazilian case, the recently organised book by Netto et al., 2017). Globally, it is an appendix to the rest of the Plan – it is, say, a morphic peninsula, hanging from the Plan from the Bus Station and surrounded by unoccupied land to the north, east and south. Locally, built space occupies a fraction of the available area, doors are barely visible for they open to secondary spaces, transitions between interior and exterior spaces are always indirect by means of various devices: ramps, tunnels, flyovers on streets or reflecting pools that surround buildings. Douglas’ “formality” realises itself through sheer size but also through these various devices which mark off inside from outside, attributes, subtle as they may be here, which run from Mayan ceremonial centres’ ramparts, through castles’ moats and bridges, to the encircling walls of Imperial Beijing.

And yet, social life penetrates the interstices of this exceptional space, as fissures in the dominant order (Holanda, 2017). Both as bottom-up phenomena, public spaces lodge petty commerce and services in daily life, frequented by the civil servants who work here (Figure 13), and tens of thousands of people in special gatherings, along the whole city’s history, particularly in the last years, from 2013 onwards (Figure 15). The latter demonstrations have run through big cities all over the country, and it remains to be investigated – if this is ever possible – if they have been relatively more
or less significant in Brasília, let alone if the Capital’s space has interfered in them, for better or for worse. For certain, they rank among the most important public meetings the city has ever witnessed. It had been many years since the National Congress surroundings, ramps and ceiling of the platform-building, upon which the cupolas of the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies rest, had been thus occupied by demonstrators (Figure 15). The symbolic impact of such an image can hardly be stronger.

Figure 13. Petty commerce and services at lunch time, in the fringes of the Esplanade of Ministries


If there are local and global morphological restrictions concerning the presence of people in Brasília’s monumental spaces, there are also circumstances that favour it, namely the fact the Costa has brought to the very core of the city the central Bus Station, to which there has been the later addition of the metro station, thus making, in public transit terms, the western extreme of the Monumental Axis the most accessible point in the metropolis. If in some cases architectural configuration can be said to be highly determinant of the presence, or otherwise, of people in places, we must be careful in examining the specificities of each circumstance. Leaving aside the accessibility by public transportation, people may have the will and the strength to overcome difficulties and make themselves present in places
against all (architectural) odds. Back to Holston: “In Brasilia, the outdoor city public of other Brazilian cities has all but disappeared”. Have they?

Figure 15. National Congress. June 17th 2013. (Source: Ronaldo de Oliveira/CB/D.A. Press)

5. CONCLUSION

A wide body of evidence suggests that both hard and soft modern strategies conspire against richly occupied open urban spaces, if by such we understand an intense and varied co-presence of people in them. Is this the case in “modern” Brasilia?

Yes and no. The hard trend clearly impacts negatively the use of space, particularly in the distant periphery. It presents itself in the form of high-rise and low-rise gated communities, but it also comes in open street systems in which “T” and “L” junctions proliferate, demanding often twists and turns as one navigates through such boroughs – Borges’ “labyrinth of walls”.

But Brasilia’s Pilot Plan has invested rather in the soft solution and has done so most successfully. The best example are the residential superblocks, highly praised by its inhabitants – and correspondingly well used, although high costs of implementation and maintenance, as well as high real estate values, imply predominantly residents of upper social layers. And Costa has invested in the strategy particularly in the city’s monumental scale – the space of the State par excellence. A place that has been intended as primarily expressive, not instrumental, and therefore open only to actual appropriation on special occasions, has entirely fulfilled its role, with a plus: daily life has also inserted itself in the interstices of this essentially symbolic order. Furthermore, perhaps the strong images of the gatherings, widespread through social networks, have their symbolic power enhanced by the expressive power of the place itself in which they happen.

This theme is to be pursued further. There are places in Brasilia, which remained uncommented in this paper, the enquire into which potentially enriches architectural practice, in the never-ending virtuous
circle of our agency, and towards both ends of the spectrum: central urban places intensely used in daily life, in which subjects overcome barriers imposed by hard design, and bucolic surroundings by the lakeshore, where softness is paramount. There are precious lessons in both.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank the Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico – CNPq for a research grant which made possible this research. He also thanks Bruna Kronenberger for collaborating with precious information to the contents above.

REFERENCES


Proceedings of the 12th Space Syntax Symposium


HILLIER, Bill. Space is the machine. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.


SITTE, Camillo (1986 [1889]) The Birth of Modern City Planning, ed. by G. R. Collins and C. C.