

War and Peace

The debates on building the Civic Center in Brasília

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Abstract The debates on the Civic Center of the new capital in Brazil go back to the technical commissions after the Belcher Report in 1954, until the Three Powers Plaza, designed by Oscar Niemeyer and Lucio Costa in 1957. It remains unclear the establishment of significance between the architecture of the Civic Plaza and its expectations in the political environment and in public opinion. It resents texts about the confrontation between the newly inaugurated president Juscelino Kubitschek and Marshal José Pessoa, then responsible for the city planning. Newspapers of the period and primary documentation have demonstrated this dispute, qualifying Kubitschek's cultural power and investigating how Pessoa's technical staff, Niemeyer and Costa had formulated architectures for the Civic Plaza of the capital.

Keywords: Brasília, Juscelino Kubitschek, Oscar Niemeyer.

Guerra e paz . As discussões sobre a construção do Centro Cívico de Brasília

Resumo As discussões sobre o Centro Cívico da nova capital do Brasil remontam às comissões técnicas após o Relatório Belcher, em 1954, até a Praça dos Três Poderes, projetada por Oscar Niemeyer e Lucio Costa em 1957. Resta obscuro o estabelecimento de nexos entre a arquitetura da Praça Cívica e suas expectativas no meio político e na opinião pública. Ressente-se de textos acerca do confronto entre o recém-empossado presidente Juscelino Kubitschek e o marechal José Pessoa, então responsável pelo planejamento da cidade. Jornais de época e documentação primária demonstram essa disputa, qualificando o poder cultural de Kubitschek e esmiuçando como o corpo técnico de Pessoa e, depois, Niemeyer e Costa, formularam arquiteturas para a Praça Cívica da nova capital.

Palavras-chave: Brasília, Juscelino Kubitschek, Oscar Niemeyer.

Guerra y paz . Las discusiones sobre la construcción del Centro Cívico de Brasília

Resumen Las discusiones sobre el centro cívico de la nueva capital de Brasil remontan a las comisiones técnicas desde el reporte Belcher en 1954 hasta la Plaza de los Tres Poderes diseñada por Oscar Niemeyer y Lucio Costa en 1957. Permanece oscuro el nexo entre la arquitectura de la plaza y el medio político. Destacase la ausencia de textos que detallen el confronto entre el presidente Juscelino Kubitschek y el mariscal José Pessoa, incumbente del planeamiento de la ciudad. La revisión bibliográfica de periódicos y documentación demuestran una disputa que ladea la obra de Oscar Niemeyer con pretensiones de poder cultural de Kubitschek mientras se detalla como el cuerpo técnico de Pessoa, Niemeyer y Costa desarrollaran distintas arquitecturas para la plaza.

Palabras clave: Brasília, Juscelino Kubitschek, Oscar Niemeyer.

The construction of the federal capital was carried out over decades of debates among intellectuals, politicians, scientists, technicians and other agents. From 1956 to 1960, the works on the construction site began under the administration of Juscelino Kubitschek and crystallized the president's own persona as statist and founder among palaces and *superquadras*.

This nonlinear process was marked by different interests. The journey to the design and construction of the Three Powers Plaza – *Praça dos Três Poderes* in Brasília depended much on the political landscape of the period and its sudden transformations, making the capital a point of continuous dispute. By gathering official documents available in archives, newspaper notes from the period, and some unpublished drawings found in a French edition of *War and Peace* within the personal collection of Oscar Niemeyer, it was possible to elaborate new considerations and prepare a new narrative about the Civic Center of the new capital and the constellation of imaginary that illuminated it.

There is no convention about the moment when a city becomes functional enough to exist, and in the case of an urbanization full of meanings like that of a capital, the Civic Center is a privileged space, which needed to be ready for the inauguration of the city in April 1960. The Three Powers Plaza and its exhaustive celebration overclouded the discontinuity of the undertaking. In 1956, the newly inaugurated Juscelino Kubitschek had his own agenda for the new capital that seemed out of place. The president had inherited a solid supraparty structure that already had an initial planning in charge of the *Federal Capital Construction and Transition Planning Commission* – CPCMCF, formerly the *New Federal Capital Location Commission* – CLNCF, established under the Café Filho government. The urban design, already drafted by the Commission, was under the contracting phase and the capital was not called Brasília, but Vera Cruz.

Brasília or Vera Cruz would equally serve Kubitschek's plans. However, the president's own style in connecting his image to the buildings, music, speeches and other cultural expressions explained his desire to dilute the commission and reorganize the entire process:

The appropriation and political use of the social imaginary can only be achieved if its diffusion and adaptation is ensured by the proper mechanisms of persuasion, pressure and inculcation of values and beliefs, notably propaganda; understood not only in the usual sense, linked to the press and advertising, but also that which infiltrates other sectors in popular demonstrations, in administrative rituals, in political discourse. Kubitschek knew not only how to take advantage of this unconscious element, but also how to instil values and beliefs that have acted to transform him into a 'symbolic character' over the years.¹

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¹ SIMÕES, J.G. *Sirênico Canto. Juscelino Kubitschek e a construção de uma imagem*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2000, p.12.

If the presidency was the culmination of a long-term career planned around recurring images, it is not fortuitous that his preferred architect would be immediately involved in the affairs of the new capital. Oscar Niemeyer, since 1940, had contracts promoted by Kubitschek in all spheres of the political power, from the city hall of Belo Horizonte to the government of Minas Gerais.

The politician was clear about the ideological aspect necessary to make the capital a spatial and symbolic expression of his developmental political ideology, which went back less to the previous missions and commissions than to his own collection of symbols between the past and the modern present made with his architect.

In an article about the Church of São Francisco de Assis, in the Pampulha complex, aspects of the first association of Kubitschek and Niemeyer were made, showing how it was resolved by carefully observing the typologies of small chapels made in the territory of Minas Gerais in the mid-18th century, as a means of going back not only to its scale, but to the whole gesture of founding small villages around these edifications. "Intervening in the present as a continuous act of 'foundation', to release its emancipatory ambitions from the vices and violence that mark the history of Brazil."²

² BENOIT, A. FRAJNDLICH, R.U. "A extinta pureza: a Igreja da Pampulha e as capelas de Ouro Preto (Minas Gerais), in. *Oculum ensaios*, n.16, v. 2, 2019, p.297.

In Diamantina, Kubitschek and Niemeyer also worked together seeking to place modern edifices, colonial fabric and morphology on equal footing, continuing the scale of the series of houses with the new public edifications. Regiani, in her dissertation has shown that the National Historical and Artistic Heritage Service – SPHAN, Kubitschek and Niemeyer were aligned in the hometown of the future president. "The decorous implementation of the [modern] buildings, in addition to the prominence of the consecrated visuals of the village, consolidates the existence of a modern route in the city, in which the walker can freely travel the limits of time." In the conclusions, the researcher has observed, "the model aspect of the mining village is reaffirmed as a witness to the association among ideology, historical preservation, modernizing pretensions, government and architecture."³

³ ESPIG REGIANI, L. *Diamantina e o percurso da arquitetura moderna: Lucio Costa, Juscelino Kubitschek - e Oscar Niemeyer. Dissertação de mestrado*. Campinas: Faculdade de Engenharia Civil, Arquitetura e Urbanismo, 2019, p.164.

These episodes show that Kubitschek's cultural, imagetic and spatial thinking needed simultaneity, which was achieved by his association with Oscar Niemeyer. Not by chance, since Kubitschek's first presidential moves, his architect had been around, both in the constructive and destructive strategy.

Destroying Vera Cruz: From the symbol to the urban fabric

The redemocratization of 1945 gave new impetus to the debates about moving the capital.⁴ In October 1954, President Café Filho had material to make the transition from the study phase to the urban design phase, especially after the Belcher Report, made by the American company Donald J. Belcher & Associates for professional planning of the site for the new capital, seen as a defining landmark of its final position on the map of Brazil.

⁴ Cf. TAVARES, J. *Op. Cit.* e NORONHA, I. "Brasília: panorama jurídico-histórico. Em torno da legislação fundadora de Brasília" in. *Brasília*, a.47, n.188, 2010, pp. 153-166.

He appointed Marshal José Pessoa to the CPCMCF commission to head a previously constituted group that had representation within the branches of the government, forming a mixed cadre. Pessoa would leave his legacy in the technical advance of understanding the final terrain through aerophotogrammetry, the supply demands and the needs of the works and infrastructure.

According to Luiz Castiglione, the marshal was “an obstinate entrepreneur, an idealist, a man of independent and sovereign attitudes, with his own light at the level of rationality, and with intense passions for his ideas at the level of emotions, such as those that could give Brasília the affectionate codename of Vera Cruz”.⁵

⁵ CASTIGLIONE, L.H. “Brasília, codinome Vera Cruz: a comissão engenheira que fundou as bases da construção da nova capital”, in. *Veredas de Brasília. As expedições geográficas em busca de um sonho*. Brasília: IBGE, 2010, p.99.

On May 9, 1955, the commission went public through the marshal and gave the press the name of the capital: Vera Cruz⁶, it said, “means a venerable tradition of our homeland, involves us lovingly under the cloak of faith, reminding us of the first name given to our country”⁷.

⁶ Mudança da capital” in. *A noite*, 9 de maio de 1955, p.3.

⁷ “Chamar-se-ia Vera Cruz a nova capital do Brasil” in. *A noite*, 12 de maio de 1955, p.6.

Juscelino Kubitschek, in turn, was daily in the press as a candidate during those months. On May 20, the politician commented on themes for the new capital: “He does not disagree with the thesis, but he thinks that it will take about 10 to 15 years for the preliminary works to install a capital, which is why he cannot promise anything concrete about it.”⁸

⁸ “Definitiva a chapa Juscelino – Jango” in. *A noite*, 20 de maio de 1956, p.7.

Kubitschek’s statements put Pessoa’s pretensions at risk: it was necessary to speed up the work. The marshal submitted his project in September 1955 to Café Filho. In it, Vera Cruz qualified current issues of modern urbanism, even by citing Le Corbusier. In the report, Pessoa affirmed that “everything happens in our plan according to the expression of Le Corbusier: the pedestrian must be separated from the infernal round of cars that circulate freely”.⁹

⁹ *Relatório anual*, p.78.

The Franco-Swiss architect was not just a reference. Within the planning actions, the commission aimed at “Mr. Le Corbusier coming to Rio de Janeiro to advise the Brazilian architects responsible for the project, according to his ideas and artistic ability, universally recognized”.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 75.

Contact with Le Corbusier was in progress: in June 1955, communication from the embassy with the Rue de Sévres office was intense:

¹¹ Letter from Le Corbusier to Marshal José Pessoa, June 24, 1955. CPDOC FGV, JP vp 1954.10.01 Rolo 2, fot. 417.

*‘My desire is not to establish the plan for the Capital of Brazil, but to be in charge of carrying out what is called ‘Pilot Plan’. The ‘Pilot Plan’ contains the expression, through drawings and texts, of the idea of the general and particular order that my experience allows to submit to the occasion of this problem. The urban plan will be the work of Brazilian architects.’*¹¹

¹² “Le Corbusier no Brasil?” in. *Correio da Manhã*. August 27, 1956, p.12. According to the article, Corbusier was nominated by Burle Marx and Reidy, but it is impossible to verify whether they were in fact the intermediaries in this relationship. It is unlikely; since Corbusier already had a project underway with the Brazilian embassy, through the Casa do Brasil project in Paris, which required no introduction. In addition, the two architects did not attend the Subcommittee meetings, being left out of the team list in the report.

The suggestion would give the international seal of a prestigious professional. Columnist Jayme Maurício, from newspaper *Correio da Manhã*, managed to investigate the negotiations with the foreign architect. “Is it not the case for the Institute of Architects to speak out?”¹², asked Mauricio.

¹³ “Nova capital: metrópole sem par no mundo” in. *A noite*, 05 de outubro de 1955, p. 2.

Ignoring the protests, the marshal submitted the previous technical plans for approval by Café Filho. On September 12, Café Filho formalized the proposal, renaming the New Federal Capital Location Commission – CLNCF group. One day after the October elections, José Pessoa returned to the press seeking to build bridges with the following administrators. In the article, a new phase was emphasised, in which “all renowned architects and urban planners were invited for the planning. There are, however, two notable absences, Oscar Niemeyer’s, who dodged by claiming commitments abroad, and Lucio Costa’s, who also presented considerable reasons”.¹³

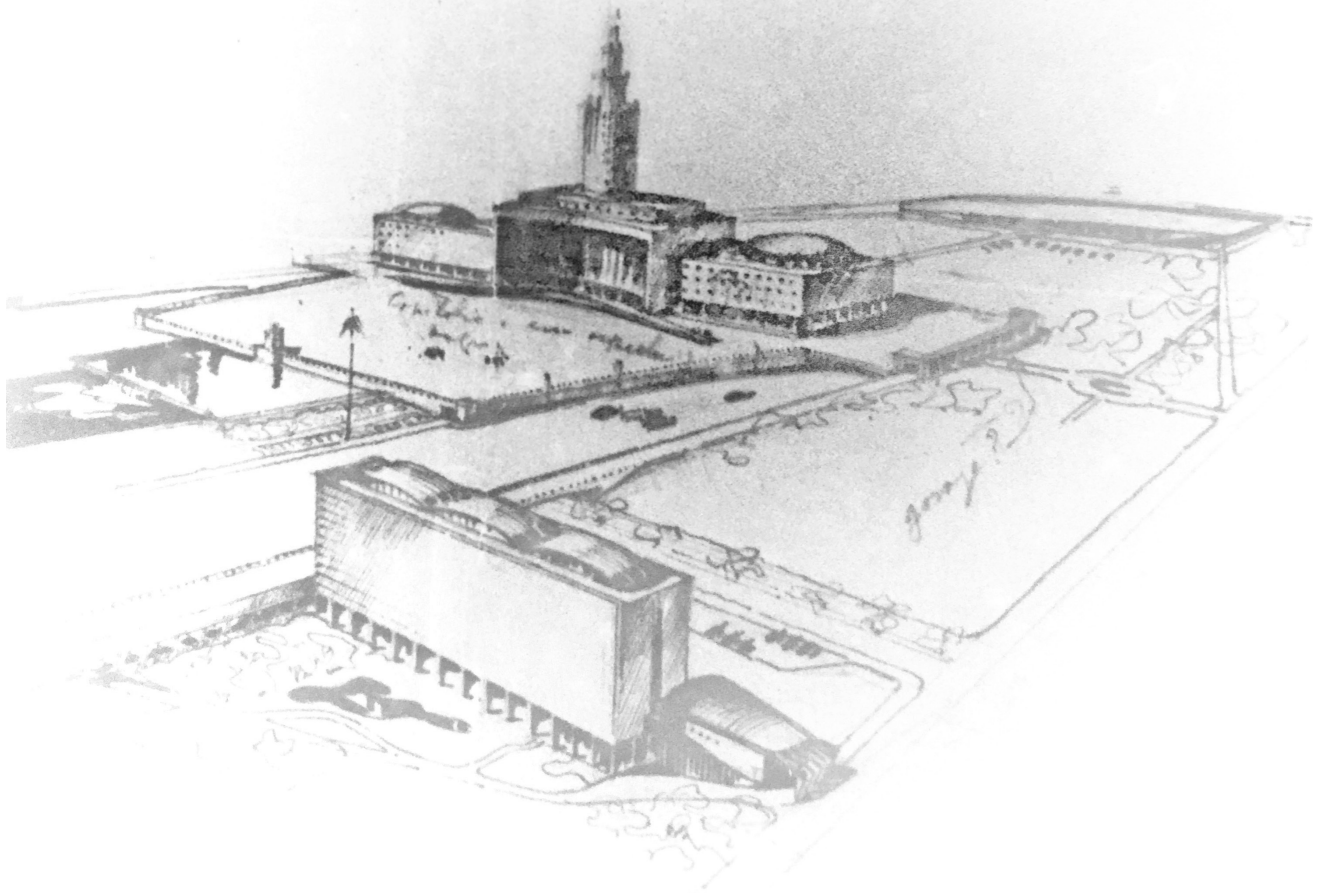


Figure 1: Sketch for the civic center of Vera Cruz made within the commission. Source: CPDOC FGV, José Pessoa Collection.

¹⁴ “The members of the URBANISTIC PLANNING Subcommittee, engineers Raul Penna Firme, Afonso Eduardo Reidy, José Oliveira Reis, Stelio de Moraes and Roberto Burle Marx, accepted the invitation and compromised to collaborate with this Commission, without any charge to the government. (...) Our decision was communicated to all members of the Subcommittee, but only the architect engineers Raul Penna Firme and José Oliveira Reis attended, although more than once their cooperation was requested. In view of this, we were forced to invite Prof. Roberto Lacombe to join the ... continues on the next page ...

The phrase ‘all renowned architects and urban planners’, without mentioning names, contrasted with the absences of Niemeyer and Costa, in addition to those of Burle-Marx and Reidy – invited to the commission who never showed up at the meetings ¹⁴ –, suggesting that the circle from Rio de Janeiro organized around Modern Architecture was not engaged in the accomplishment of Vera Cruz.

In the press, the marshal seemed to react to this boycott, presenting his own opinions about the form of the city and its Civic Center: “The public edifices will have the neoclassical style, since the experiences of public edifices in vehemently modern style in Rio were not stimulating. Private residences, however, will present the latest achievements of Brazilian Modern Architecture” ¹⁵ (figure 1).

In proposing a mixture of modern urbanism with historical styles, the general revealed a superficial understanding of modern architects, such as Corbusier. Only a superficial taste for French culture could bring these two irreconcilable currents together. On the other hand, it was possible that mentioning Le Corbusier was nothing more than a ploy to prevent Niemeyer from taking over the project, either because of his close connection with Kubitschek, a political opponent of Café Filho, or even the architect’s political militancy along the Brazilian Communist Party – PCB.

... continuation of note 14 ...

Subcommittee, to which he rendered outstanding services, like the others. " COOPERATION COMMISSION FOR MOVING THE FEDERAL CAPITAL. Relatório anual da comissão de localização da Nova Capital Federal. Brasília, 1955, p.074. Available at: <<https://bd.camara.leg.br/bd/handle/bdcamara/3123>>.

¹⁵ "Nova capital: metrópole sem par no mundo" in. A noite, October 5, 1955, p. 2.

¹⁶ "Despachará o sr. Juscelino Kubitschek na nova capital" in. A noite, December 9, 1955, p. 3.

¹⁷ Letter from Oscar Niemeyer to Marshal José Pessoa, circa January 1956. CPDOC FGV, JP vp 1954.10.01 Rolo 4, fot. 26.

¹⁸ Letter from Marshal José Pessoa to Oscar Niemeyer", January 26, 1956. CPDOC FGV, JP vp 1954.10.01 Rolo 4, fot. 27-9.

¹⁹ Letter from Marshal José Pessoa to General Nelson de Mello, February 1956. CPDOC FGV, JP vp 1954.10.01 Rolo 5, p.6.

²⁰ "Urgência para a nova capital. Mantido na chefia do planejamento o marechal José Pessoa" in. A Noite, February 6, 1956, p.5.

Indeed, Kubitschek and João Goulart were elected in the late 1955. In December, a note came out in the press: Kubitschek said he was thinking of dispatching twice a week from the site of the new capital.¹⁶

His administration began in 1956, and with it, the destruction of Vera Cruz. The marshal called Oscar Niemeyer to talk about the new capital, suggesting a first interference by the new president. This time, the architect appeared and sent him a letter on the same day, expressing his "favourable conviction to his idea of handing over the planning of the new capital to Brazilian technicians". On the practical side, he added, "As for your invitation to participate in the work, I must tell you that in principle I agree, depending only on establishing a new understanding on the subject".¹⁷

From then on, the marshal could have worked to survive his position and have the new president on good terms, but the reply to Niemeyer showed that he foresaw his departure:

"As I had the opportunity to reveal to you during our conversation – and I have repeated it to everyone – it is in my mind to propose to the government the selection of a team of Brazilian technicians, and send them abroad for a training course, particularly on urban planning, traffic engineering and urbanism." It is not possible for Brazil to be content to live in this self-taught regime, when it comes to a subject of such relevance as the planning of new cities. There is an urgent need to bring the knowledge of more advanced peoples to our country, for as we are, it is a paradox to the effort that we have already made, in this sense, in the field of architecture".¹⁸

Pessoa insisted on closing the contract with Le Corbusier. In February, he sent an official letter to Nelson de Mello, head of the military cabinet, for the Presidency to authorize the French-Swiss architect's proposal.¹⁹ There is no precise date of the document, or whether it was issued indeed, but certainly, the Marshal would be face to face with Kubitschek that month. His letter of resignation, reported in the newspapers, was carried in his pocket during the meeting.

Kubitschek, however, refused Pessoa's exit.²⁰ The newspapers reported that the marshal gave the president a "voluminous dossier" with all the hitherto available information about the new capital. The president gathered the information and made Pessoa anticipate in the press the idea that "the commission should be transformed into an autarchy", sowing the seed for the Company for Urbanization of the New Capital of Brazil – NOVACAP. The work would continue for a while and some resolutions were signed between Pessoa and Kubitschek, such as the absence of industries and the difficult discussion about satellite cities.

In April, Kubitschek submitted Bill No. 1.234/1956 to the Chamber of Deputies, which provided for the transition of the new capital and other measures. There, the idea of autarchy took shape with a board and council, all appointed by the president.

Kubitschek gave garbled messages in his interviews, suggesting that he could change resolutions that were stony at the time, even considering the change in terrain. The Institute of Brazilian Architects – IAB mobilized in favor of the president and began an

articulation of modern architects against Pessoa's interests. A special commission was organized, with Niemeyer and Reidy as members, to address directly to the President of the Republic, giving reactive opinions to "repeated and contradictory statements by the president of the CLNCF commission and willing to fight for a public competition only for Brazilians".²¹

²¹ "O IAB e a nova capital" in. *Acrópole*, n.26, 1956, sp.

On May 10, 1956, a long interview with Pessoa was published in *Semanário*. Finally, images and urban commitments of the city imagined by the marshal were publicized. There, the subcommittee's draft made in 1955 appeared for the first time to the public (figure 2). The drawing spoke more than any word by Pessoa. His appeal to the Franco-Swiss professional, or his call to modern architects, was undone by the stylistic character of the illustrations.

Vera Cruz would have one-kilometer long blocks and a civic nucleus settled in the heart of the capital. The main avenue, with 126 meters, nicknamed "fishing rod", defined a plaza formed by a perimeter bounded by the public buildings with a solid palace in the center. One could say that the design of the urban grid would have a timeless functional appeal, but the Civic Center itself kept that horizontal and symmetrical expression of the *Beaux-arts* urban projects.

Figure 2: Edition of *Correio da Manhã* with the urban fabric of the new capital. Source: *Semanário*, ano 01, n.6, p.4. Digital Newspaper Library of the National Library.

PAGINA 4

FUNCIONARIOS QUEREM IR PARA O PLANALTO GOIANO

- * Mas não acreditam muito que a capital vá
- * Juscelino queria comprar palácio pré-fabricado no Paraná
- * Novo Distrito Federal: 940 km do Rio, avenida de 126 metros de largura, quarteirões independentes
- * Muito patriotismo e um canhão de pesca

Reportagem de MARIA AMALIA GUILHERME

A futura capital do Brasil ainda não está batizada, mas sua pedra fundamental talvez seja lançada ainda este ano. A Comissão de Planejamento da Construção e Mudança da Capital Federal, presidida pelo marechal José Pessoa, tem 13 subcomissões, todas trabalhando intensamente. Técnicos estudam todas as possibilidades, empenhando-se em resolver todos os problemas.

A cidade constará de duas áreas distintas: o sítio da capital, com mil quilômetros, e, à volta, ocupando 5.860 quilômetros quadrados, o novo Distrito Federal.

Embora adiantados os estudos da transferência, o presidente Juscelino Kubitschek está processando uma reforma geral na Comissão de Planejamento, não se podendo afirmar sejam definitivas as conclusões atuais.

No planalto de Goiás, a capital ficará numa altitude média de 1.200 metros, a três horas de voo do Rio e a 940 quilômetros de distância. O sr. Kubitschek chegou mesmo a pensar em mandar buscar, no Paraná, uma casa de madeira, pré-fabricada, para a instalação provisória do palácio presidencial no planalto. Mas, como seu entusiasmo não chegasse ao ponto de convertê-lo em eremita, preferiu, por enquanto, o Palácio das Laranjeiras.

— "Sim, com entusiasmo patriótico, vendo nessa mudança a salvação do Brasil e do próprio Rio, que, com isso, receberá o alívio correspondente ao de uma sangria num apoplectico.

"A parte sentimental deve ser colocada em segundo plano. Já é tempo de exigir do funcionalismo o melhor de sua capacidade.

— "Sou apologista da mudança.



Plano-piloto da futura capital do país, no planalto goiano

sol o sr. Isaac Brown, secretário da Presidência: — "Sou apologista da mudança.

Martins, tivemos estas declarações: mas não acredito na sua realização. Gostaria de ir."

Two days later, *A Noite* exposed the frustration of the public opinion with what the prospect of the new capital offered. “The sketches by the Planning Commission ... show us the spirit of Washington’s ‘new classic’. Gentlemen of mine, in a country whose president is the animator of modern architecture, how could backward sketches dating from 1890 emerge?” Ariel’s appeal was to the president and the Institute of Architects: “We have Lucio Costa and we have Niemeyer!”²²

²² “A nova capital” in. *A Noite*, may 12, 1956, p. 3.

In the second section, Flávio de Aquino used the expression “monstrosity” when referring to the drawings, pondering that: “Although it seems incredible, exactly in Brazil, where modern architecture has reached a universal name, its edifices are designed in a neoclassic style (?) and in a monotonous and old-fashioned checkered city plan”²³.

²³ “Os Projetos da Nova Capital” in. *A Noite*, May 12, 1956, seg. cad. p.2.

The dissemination of the drawings had a dual function: the first was to dismantle the marshal’s reputation in the literate circles. The second was to highlight the veiled expectation that the new capital would present not only studies and tasks, but seductive images of a metropolis that intended to replace Rio de Janeiro and its pulsating metropolitan life. The articles of *A Noite* called for modern architecture in a decade in which Reidy and Portinho completed the construction of Pedregulho, São Paulo had made the exhibition of the IV Centenário, the schools of architecture and institutes of architects of the directories around Brazil directed their statutes on the Brazilian Modern Architecture that had already spread throughout the country. How should Brasília give expression to all of this? There was a matrix difficulty in solving the insertion of new symbols in the heart of the Cerrado biome, a place seen as isolated, signaller of a pioneering exploration that, by itself, would not be enough to mobilize a drastic move in the figures of power in the country. The *Semanário* article, which interviewed public officials who would have to move to Brasília, ended with a joke in two verses by humourist Alvaro Armando:

“Go, go, my love ...

Go, for I’ll go later ...”²⁴

²⁴ “Funcionários querem ir para o planalto goiano” in. *O semanário* ano 1, n.6, p.4.

The marshal met with representatives of the institute of architects – IAB at the end of May. Reporting to Kubitschek, he presented two options: one for keeping the eminent foreign architect, and the other for following the IAB guidelines.²⁵

²⁵ Letter from Marshal José Pessoa to President Juscelino Kubitschek. May 21, 1956. CPDOC FGV, JP vp 1954.10.01.

With the choice for the second proposal, without Corbusier, eclectic buildings and autonomy to build the new capital, José Pessoa resigned irrevocably on June 4, 1956. Kubitschek accepted. Five days later, on June 9, in *Correio da Manhã*, Jayme Maurício covered a meeting of architects at the IAB debating strategies for an urban competition for the plan for the new capital made entirely by Brazilians (figure 3).²⁶

²⁶ “Dirige-se o Instituto de Arquitetos ao sr. Kubitschek” in. *Correio da Manhã*, June 9, 1956 sp.

On September 19, 1956, after processing in the Chamber and the Senate, PL1.234/1956 was approved and became Law No. 2.874, opening the way for the urbanization company NOVACAP. At the initiative of deputy Pereira da Silva from the state of Amazonas, Article 33rd was added to the law during his passage in the chambers, whereby: “The name of ‘Brasília’ is given to the new federal capital”.²⁷

²⁷ NORONHA, “Brasília: panorama jurídico-histórico” *Op. Cit.* p. 165.

CORREIO DA MANHÃ, Sábado, 9 de Junho de 1956

ITINERÁRIO DAS ARTES PLÁSTICAS

Jayme Maurício

A mudança da capital

DIRIGE-SE O INSTITUTO DE ARQUITETOS AO SR. KUBITSCHKEK



Preocupam-se os arquitetos com o planejamento da futura capital, e discutem entre si, tomando medidas objetivas. Ary Garcia Rosa discute detalhes com Jorge Moreira, enquanto Oscar Niemeyer (no centro), olhos fechados, cochila ou medita

O sr. Ary Garcia Roza, presidente do Instituto de Arquitetos do Brasil, em nome daquela associação de classe, enviou ofício ao sr. Juscelino Kubitschek focalizando os estudos para a mudança da capital da República e o ponto de vista dos arquitetos brasileiros através do seu órgão representativo a respeito dessa parte do texto da Constituição. Frisando que da

b) cessária;
da elaboração de um esquema de Plano Regional para a área da nova Capital e do estabelecimento — das diretrizes para o Plano de Urbanização da mesma, integradas de modo a que se obtenha o equilíbrio TERRITÓRIO — POPULAÇÃO — ECONOMIA;

Figure 3: Niemeyer and colleagues at the IAB debate the choice of the project for the future capital, shortly after the departure of Marshal José Pessoa. Source: Correio da Manhã, June 9, 1956. Digital Newspaper Library of the National Library.

Vera Cruz ended. Brasília inherited the design competition agreed with the institute of architects – IAB, and the challenge to inspire confidence in the governmental headquarters distant from Rio de Janeiro, which would unite Brazil around a place considered pristine of metropolitan constructions. Kubitschek and Niemeyer were experienced in creating images, spaces and places immediately related to horizons of progress.

Constructing Brasília: From the plaza to the urban fabric

Niemeyer was hired by NOVACAP on October 9, 1956.²⁸ Unlike Vera Cruz, which had come up with an urban fabric and only after they thought about the edifices, they decided to start Brasília by configuring its edifices in the Civic Center. It would not be enough to plan Brasília: it was necessary to present its image speedily and that would be up to Niemeyer's architecture.

²⁸ "Relação do critério de pontos para distribuição das residências" in. *Arquivo Público do Distrito Federal*, BRARPDF Nov. 5. D1, caixa 05/12, p. 9.

The drawings and model published in *Módulo*, Niemeyer's magazine in 1956, showed the palace and the presidential residence, a hotel and a church surrounded by palm trees, interconnected by winding paths (figure 4).

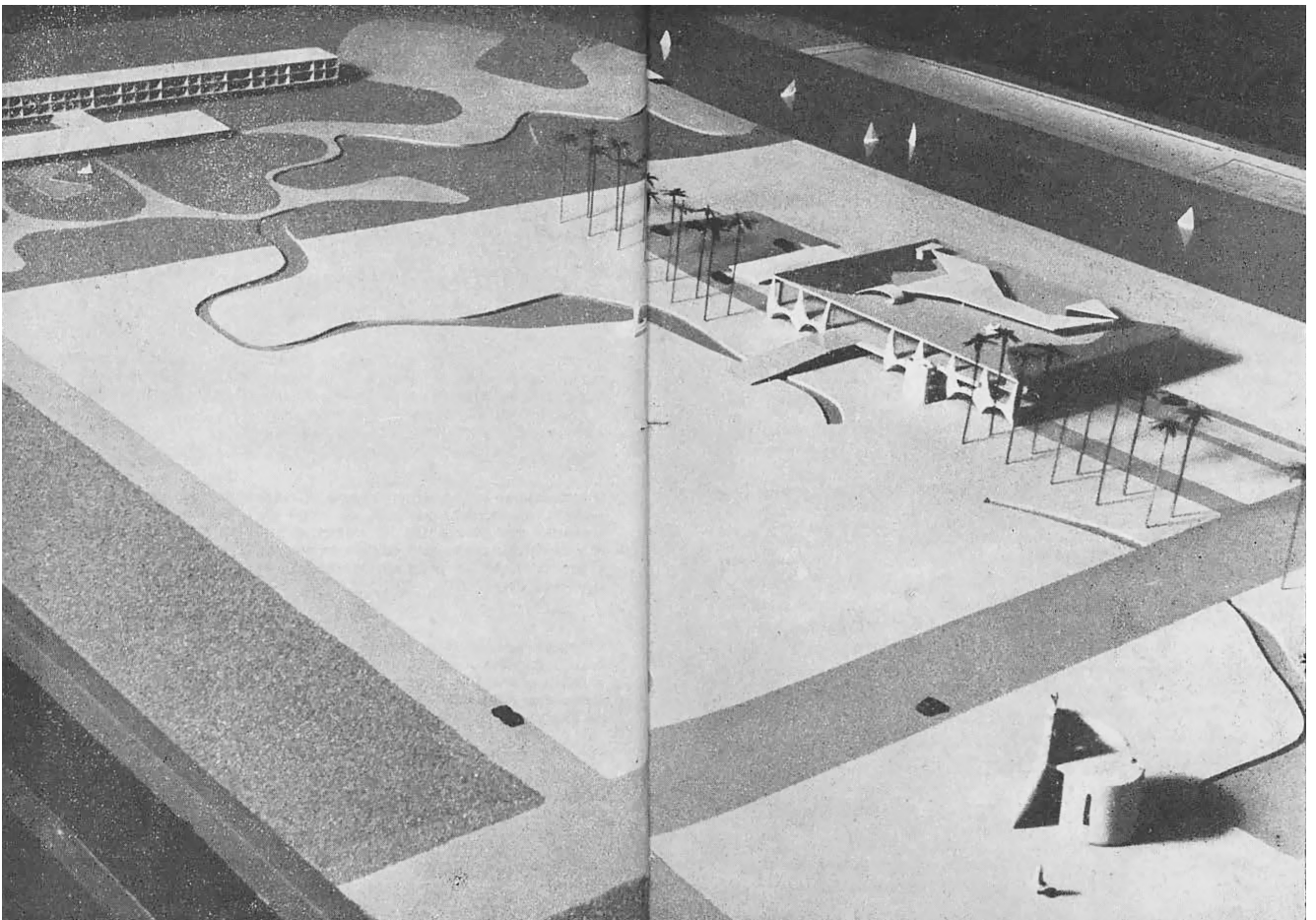
Other civic edifices, such as the Legislative Chambers and the Judiciary, had not been defined. In the article, the architect explained the programs:

*The hotel will comprise about 300 rooms and will have all modern comforts, such as spacious lounges, restaurants, living rooms and amusement points. The official residence, which will have a definitive character, will be the effective residence of the President of the Republic, having been designed taking into account this circumstance. The palace will consist of large glazed halls, with easily removable partitions, in order to be able to serve other purposes, if necessary. In addition to these constructions, as mentioned, the construction of a church is predicted, according to the tradition of all cities in Brazil.*²⁹

²⁹ "Oscar Niemeyer fala sobre a nova capital do Brasil. Entrevista com José Guilherme Mendes" in. *Módulo*, n.3, 1956, p.12.

Figure 4: Civic center of Brasília before defining the competition for the pilot plan. Source: Revista Brasília n.01, January 1957.

Niemeyer referred to the "tradition of all cities in Brazil". In his description, he did not even mention a "plaza", describing the edifices as a loose cluster amid the lake's edge.



³⁰ On more than one occasion, the fragility of the Portuguese occupation of the territory was discussed in comparison to the Spanish model, a difference so well summarized in the choice of sower/tiler, Cf. BUARQUE DE HOLANDA, Sérgio. *Raízes do Brasil*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2006 [1936], p110.

³¹ Even in the most primitive rural settlements, as evidenced by Sítio Santo Antônio, in the country of São Paulo, the program was based on these three points: dwelling, accommodation and chapel. See SAIA, Luís. *Morada paulista*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1972.

³² Contract for the execution of works by administration between Companhia Urbanizadora da Nova capital do Brasil-NOVACAP and the construction company Rabello S.A., signed on December 20, 1956, for the construction of a temporary station for the airport, chapel and others". In. *Arquivo Público do Distrito Federal*, BRAR-PDF Nov. B9, caixa 233, dossiê 01.

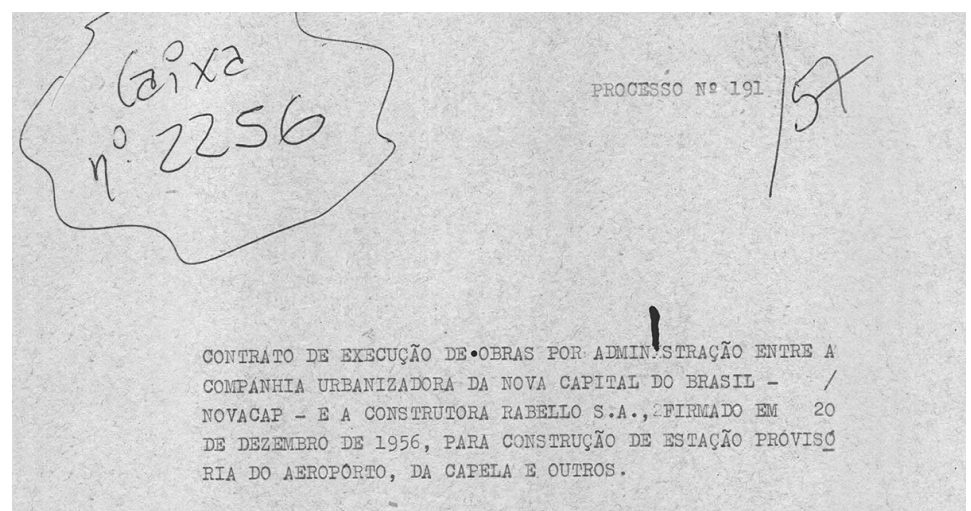
Figure 5: Works contract signed by NOVACAP for public edifices, prior to the pilot plan project defined in the competition.[Contract for execution of works by administration between the Urbanization Company of the New Capital of Brazil -NOVACAP - and the Construction Company Rabello S.A., signed on December 20, 1956, for the construction of a temporary station for the airport, chapel and others.] Source: Public Archive of the Federal District.

Leaving aside the scale of the proposal and the geometry of the edifices, we could observe a close dialogue with historical forms. If Vera Cruz parodied Rio de Janeiro of the beginning of the 20th century and its Haussmanian pretensions, this first Brasília formed a diffuse rereading of the colonial tradition between the urban and the rural environments. More than simple discursive rhetoric, a search for a ballast to give specificity to this architecture was operated. Following the Portuguese colonial tradition, such urban clusters were made, according to the classic analysis by Sérgio Buarque, without a previous plan, resulting from a spontaneous occupation, with loose constructions sprinkled in the territory.³⁰ This involuntary model would endure, producing the first villages, towns and even cities from squares, churchyards and market verandas – a scheme that could be underlying the architect's design.

The choice of programs, arranged amid a non-urban environment (a winding garden, a park), also allowed for a glimpse of the scheme of rural constructions in the former colony, with the articulation of space from the accommodation (hotel), chapel (church) and dwelling (presidential palace).³¹

In the archives of the Federal District, it is registered that, from an early age, a church would be necessary as an originary gesture, reinforcing that this ideal also found support outside the circles of architects, sealing the relationship of the State with the Catholic Church. On December 20, 1956, with the arranged site, company and personnel, the first permanent construction contract defined a scope "for the construction of a temporary station for the airport, chapel and others"³² (figure 5). The document predicted to solve the programs of that first plaza, in spite of the ongoing competition.

Elcio Gomes Silva analyzed how the presidential palace and its pillars anticipated the reasoning of what would become Alvorada Palace – discarding the first design of the residence presented in October at Módulo and taking advantage of the principles of the executive building.³³ The chapel made with a spiral plan that appeared in the model published in *Módulo* had similarities with another one, published three months earlier, in Papadaki's second book on Niemeyer, *Oscar Niemeyer Work in Progress*, under the name "Project for a chapel".³⁴ There, the church was presented in isolation, with no specific location or mention of Brasília.



³³ SILVA, E.G. Os palácios originais de Brasília. PhD Thesis. Brasília: Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo da Universidade de Brasília, 2012.

³⁴ PAPANAKI, S. *Oscar Niemeyer: Work in Progress*. Nova York: Reinhold, 1956, p.116.

³⁵ “[Kubitschek] revealed that on the 28th of this month, the official mass will be prayed in Brasília, of thanksgiving for the passage of the Government’s first anniversary.” “Instead of landing in Aragarças, the presidential plane landed in Goiânia” in. *Correio da Manhã*, January 4, 1957, p. 1.

³⁶ Cf. TAVARES, J. *Op. cit.* BRAGA, Milton. *O concurso de Brasília: os sete projetos premiados*. Masters dissertation. São Paulo: FAUUSP, 1999. For considerations on Lucio Costa’s project and the CIAMs’ notion on civic centers: MARTINS, L.P. FRAJNDLICH, U.U. “*Urbs e civitas: Lucio Costa e a democracia no projeto de Brasília*” in. *Cadernos Proarq* n.27, pp.31-49.

³⁷ SILVA, E.G. *Op. Cit.*; KATINSKY, Júlio R. *Leituras de arquitetura, viagens, projetos*. 1989. Full Professorship Thesis. São Paulo: FAUUSP, 1989.

The chapel of Papadaki and that of *Módulo* are similar to the one that is next to Alvorada Palace today, whose drawings were released in February 1957. An autonomous edification, conceived within the context of the years 1955 and 1956, in which Niemeyer coexisted within the Kubitschek circle, still making fragmented drawings and designs – like that of Catetinho –, which would later find their proper place in the capital’s process. Among competitions, initial models and sparse drawings, the spiral church was always part of the same process that found its way as an annex to Alvorada Palace.

The “chapel” mentioned in the contract was the one prioritized over the administrative buildings such as the Legislative and the Judiciary reserved for the competition, giving it a sense of priority among the first components designed for the Civic Plaza. Its function was also practical: to celebrate the first mass to consecrate the new capital. In Kubitschek’s memoirs, he connected the act of building the new Capital with the Church of Pampulha, made by Niemeyer years before, in 1945: “If setbacks had occurred in Belo Horizonte, with a humble, but beautiful small church, what could I expect when I promoted the construction of Brasília?” According to the president’s plans, the consecration of the capital would be around the last week of January – which would not happen.³⁵ Brasília should promptly have a religious building in the middle of its Civic Plaza, making JK’s interest converge with Niemeyer’s urbanist concept.

However, the chapel was not built under these terms. In February, the provisional tent to serve as a post for the consecration ceremony was being designed; and in March, the result of the competition modified the plans of a plaza in the terms that this first occupation had been conceived. Lucio Costa was the winner, after a debate that had mobilized Brazilian architects in stark contrast to the initiatives made by the commission headed by Pessoa ³⁶.

In his proposal, Costa placed the Presidential Palace next to the Legislative Chambers and the Supreme Court, creating the Three Powers Plaza, completed by Niemeyer. Drawings of the plaza’s design process were published by Júlio Katinsky ³⁷ and Silva, showing the solution process of the civic palaces that resulted, eventually, in the built version, with the Congress and the Senate lowered in relation to the level of the plaza, their chambers protruding into two domes, configuring the free space next to the Supreme Court and the Planalto Palace (figure 6).

An unprecedented document has pointed out to the existence of an intermediate stage, ignored to this date, between the drawings of 1956 and 1957. In the architect’s personal library, there is a 1955 French translation of the classic *War and Peace* by Tolstoy. In the first pages of the book, three pencil drawings of the Three Powers Plaza represent studies for a solution prior to that process published by Katinsky e Silva (figures 07, 08 and 09).

The book bears the stamp of Santos-Dumont and Galeão Airports. His flight was probably either to Berlin in 1955 or, in case it was later, to Brasília: in his memoirs, there were no trips abroad between 1957 and 1960. Moreover, his other contracts in progress outside Rio de Janeiro and Brasília were concentrated in Belo Horizonte

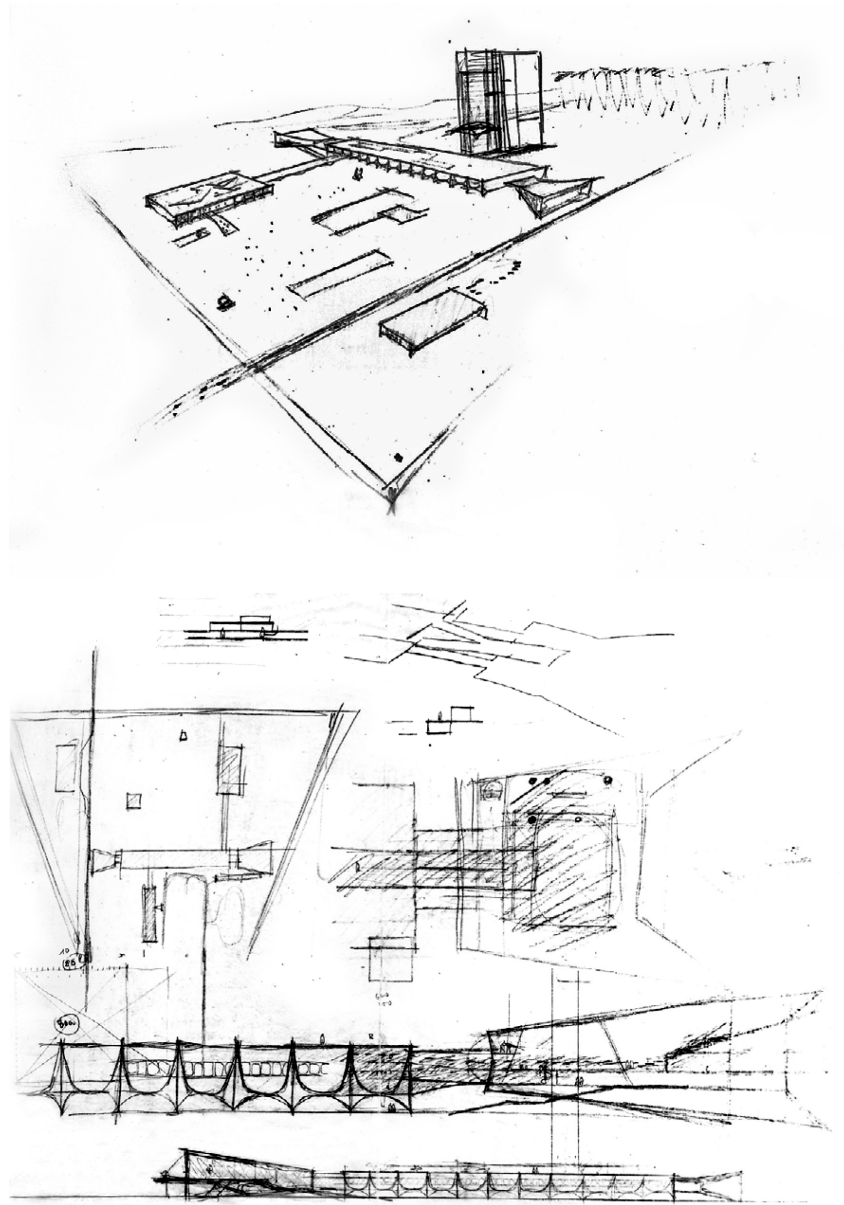


Figure 6: Study sketches for the National Congress and Three Powers Plaza. Source: SILVA, E.G. Os palácios originais de Brasília. PhD thesis. Brasília: Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo da Universidade de Brasília, 2012.

and São Paulo, more nearby cities with available roads. The air shuttle between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo was only inaugurated in 1959.

The drawings could be associated with others already known: Niemeyer strived to reconcile the system of curved columns conceived in 1956 with Costa's plan, but the indeterminate field of a park took on the precise form of the triangular plaza near Paranoá Lake. It is possible to see that the terrain was already the one proposed for the plaza in the famous airplane design, with a strange body: a large church.

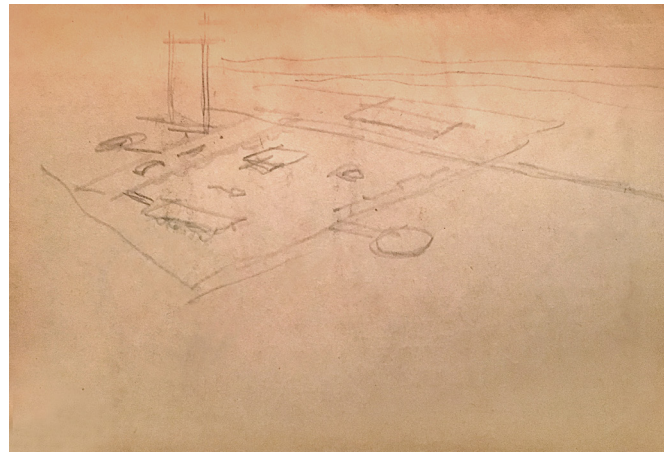
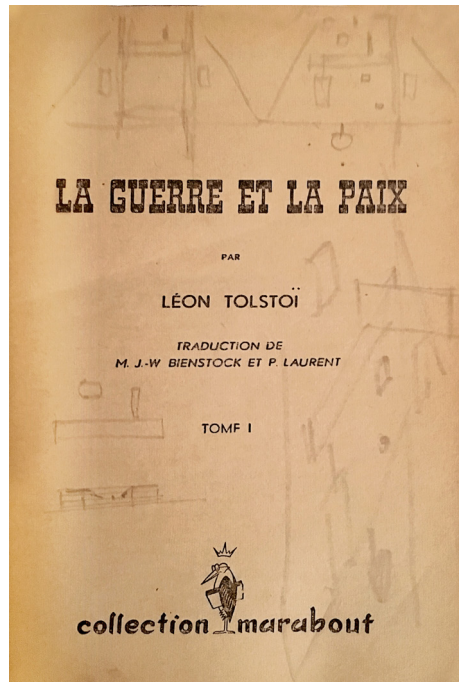


Figure 7: Sketches in War and Peace 01. Source: Oscar Niemeyer Foundation. © Niemeyer, Oscar/AUTVIS, Brazil, 2021.

Figure 8: Sketches in War and Peace 02. Source: Oscar Niemeyer Foundation. © Niemeyer, Oscar/AUTVIS, Brazil, 2021.

Figure 9: Sketches in War and Peace 03. Source: Oscar Niemeyer Foundation. © Niemeyer, Oscar/AUTVIS, Brazil, 2021.

The temple has not appeared in any other known sketch of the plaza, denoting greater similarity with Niemeyer's proposal made before the competition. The church is circular, shaped as an inverted dome. The sketches in *War and Peace* show a religious edifice outside the triangle that formed the palaces of the Three Powers.

The edifice is supported by the solution of inclined walls that pull the roof. They are quick pencil drawings, but it is clear that it connects with the Legislative Chamber that would come later, and with the important experience of the 1954 Museum of Caracas.

The available documentation on the chapel contract and the presidential orders and decrees, plus the general context of the debates on the new capital, have suggested the possibility that the sketches in *War and Peace* demonstrate the persistent need for the location of a religious building – whether a chapel, or a cathedral – close to the civic part, contrary to what was indicated in the Pilot Plan by Lucio Costa. If there was a personal chapel for the president at the Alvorada Palace, a metropolitan-sized structure should be available to the public in the heart of the Civic Center.

The idea of a church in the Three Powers Plaza had perhaps lasted as long as a flight between Rio de Janeiro and Brasília, but it is fair to ask: why was a church not built in the Three Powers Plaza? Did Lucio Costa's plaza, after all, follow the same revering concept of the "tradition of all cities in Brazil"? It seems probable that the hypothesis of its abandonment and the transformation of the park into a civic plaza mean a leap in the conception of the link between modern architecture and the new capital. The documentary information have substantially encouraged this interpretation.

The sketch in *War and Peace* was made in March 1957. The following month, Lucio Costa traveled for the first time to the site of the new capital. According to the official chronological summary: "After lunch, the President of the Republic spoke at length with architect Lucio Costa about fundamental aspects of the plan for the new capital"³⁸.

Lucio Costa had secularized opinions on the position of the church in his Pilot Plan. The cathedral was positioned on the periphery of the governmental edifices in an "autonomous plaza", for "the Church is separate from the State"³⁹, whereas the "Civic Center" figured as the democratic space par excellence, the converging point of the civitas, the place where citizens exercise politics, hence the symbolism of the Three Powers in balance. The content of the conversation between Kubitschek and Costa is unknown, absent from the memoirs of both the president and the urban planner. However, we know that the steps of the following months, whether in Niemeyer's sketches or in official actions, did not mention the church in the Three Powers Plaza.

Niemeyer and Costa entered the project at different moments, allowing the view of the pair not with the cohesive complementarity that historiography has usually established for them, but with differences in the understanding of what this maximum chapter of the association between the State and the avant-garde in Brazil could have been. In his speeches and memoirs, Kubitschek has emphasized the link between tradition and progress, in a convenient key to the country's architects. Niemeyer, as seen above, would have followed a similar path in his initial solution. Costa, by proposing the Three Powers Plaza, seemed to be less literally aligned with the links between modernity and tradition.

³⁸ PRESIDÊNCIA DA REPÚBLICA, Síntese cronológica: 1957, Rio de Janeiro, Serviço de documentação da Presidência da República, 1959, 145.

³⁹ COSTA, L. "Relatório do Plano Piloto de Brasília" in. *Módulo* n. 8, 1957, 38.

Costa distinguished the bus station as a place of intense metropolitan life in the Pilot Plan, leaving the plaza with the symbolic content that owed nothing to the old colonial tradition. The suppression of the church and the conformation of a secular space settled on the artificial plateau demarcated the rupture with the theoretical scheme of tradition as a conceptual ballast for modern Brazilian architecture on its urban scale. Such a disposition ended up resignifying Niemeyer's palaces, whose following sketches – as in the case of Planalto Palace – established a dialogue with the history of the West, while in his memoirs, the architect said that such constructions should have a dimension of distance and dream.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ "When designing these palaces, I was also concerned about the atmosphere they would give to Praça dos Três Poderes. It was not intended to be cold and technical, with the hard classic purity, expected from straight lines. I wanted to see it, on the contrary, full of forms, dreams and poetry." NIEMEYER, Oscar. *Minha experiência em Brasília*. Rio de Janeiro: Avenir Editora, 1980 (1961).

Since the early 1950s, Costa had signalled his reservations with the automatic association between modern architecture and tradition. When writing for the magazine *L'Architecture D'Aujourd'hui*, he demonstrated to believe that Brazilian modern architecture could already emancipate itself from a purely localistic explanation:

*"The current Brazilian architecture stands out from the set of contemporary construction and presents itself to the foreign eye as a manifestation of a local character, not only because it renews some resources that are part of the country's tradition, but fundamentally because it is the national artistic genius by using the materials, techniques and plastic vocabulary of our time."*⁴¹

⁴¹ COSTA, L. "Architecture, art plastique – imprévu et importance de la contribution des architectes brésiliens au développement actuel de l'architecture contemporaine". In. *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* n.42-43, 1952, p.3.

When talking to Kubitschek, one could imagine that Costa said that the objective was not to rival Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo or any other local city, nor even the idea was to be presented in a predictable way with traditional forms to the foreign gaze. It was about creating a city detached from a past that had served in the 1930s and 1940s as much inspiration – the typology of the rural house, the Minas Gerais urban houses –, but that referred to a precarious urban structure. Indeed, the Three Powers Plaza, as the nucleus of the country's new capital, imagined and reimagined by so many hands, has ended up escaping from religious mythologies, and establishing terms of balance between political powers and modern architecture, which would guide the following years in the country.

Final considerations

The Civic Center of the capital, built as the Three Powers Plaza, is the result of an interwoven web of decisions that involved not only ideological expectations attributed to the developmentalism of Juscelino Kubitschek, but also arguments about the urban character of the new capital, the quality of its buildings as monuments to a new democracy, and the delicate political thread that balanced discussions between technical bodies and public opinion in the troubled post-1954 years.⁴²

⁴² In this regard, poet and critic Haroldo de Campos said in perspective that "with all the criticism that one wants to make, Brasília is the awareness that Brazil had a prospective horizon, it is a kind of programmed utopia with a concrete content, that is, the accomplishment of a broader integration of Brazil", CAMPOS, Haroldo de. "Concretamente". *Expresso*, Lisboa, 10 de junho de 1995.

The cultural machine of Kubitschek and Niemeyer was taken to the extreme in an effort to align the technical skills of planning the new capital in favor of Brasília as a modern city, at the expense of the detriment of Marshal José Pessoa.

In the 1950s, Rio's architects did not present themselves in a monolithic way in the relation between development and tradition. Reidy, Burle-Marx, Roberto and Niemeyer himself, in works such as the Museum of Caracas, Casa das Canoas and pavilions for the IV Centenário Exhibition, showed less interest in mentioning the past. However, in the first hypothesis for a Civic Plaza in Brasília, making a direct correlation with the colonial past was preferred.

The city would be an apotheosis of that image of refoundation and conciliation – a landmark of Kubitschek’s policy so well expressed in Oscar Niemeyer’s architecture for small towns (Ouro Preto, Pampulha neighbourhood, Cataguases, Diamantina), and in a more general scope, in the theoretical discourse formulated at the National Historical and Artistic Heritage Service – SPHAN.

Its extemporaneity became known with the proposal for the Three Powers Plaza present in the winning project by Lucio Costa. It was a counterpoint to that first design that had forced the debate about what a civic space should be. The sketches in *War and Peace* show that there was an intent of conciliation, by Kubitschek and Niemeyer, with the larger scale church on the periphery of the Plaza, until the change of direction possibly motivated by the conversations of April 1957 that would define the plaza only with civic palaces. Costa, on the other hand, could not support the symbolism of a modern nation’s birth in the values of a society whose houses could be admirable, but still carried profound contradictions that needed to be overcome at that moment.

In a troubled environment that would invariably result in the 1964 Military Coup and the suppression of democratic rights, Costa gave Kubitschek and Niemeyer a theoretical way out allowing the city and country to be founded without resorting to colonialist artifices. The Three Powers Plaza has given Brasilia a dimension that perhaps could explain its survival in the years to come as a federal capital. If, in 1956, there was hesitation in going to the new space, the appeal to universal symbols was recognized even by those who transgressed them. The maintenance of the capital in the Cerrado biome, after the military coup and dictatorship, despite being usually explained by the demobilization that Brasilia allowed because of its distance from the large urban centers, is also something that has a symbolic density: occupying the Three Powers Plaza is not like taking possession of any village. The images of the tanks occupying the plaza (figure 10), as strange bodies similar to the cathedral sketched by Niemeyer in the Tolstoy volume, have revealed the resilience of metaphors.

Figure 10: Tank in the occupation of Brasilia during the dictatorship.
Source: Wikimedia Commons.



In a country of intense political upheavals, the plaza is balanced as a gravitational center toward which the entire political spectrum converges. It was the ideal arrival point for the comings and goings that had marked its political planning and design process, having gone through so many different hands: a democratic plaza for the whole country, even if, eventually, it only meant a drawing on the horizon of the Cerrado biome.

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