

Planning ideas in post-Brasilia Brazil

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Abstract

Which ideas shaped the town planning practice in Brazil after the construction of Brasilia? To answer this question, four important facts in the country's planning history are explored: the establishment of the Municipal Institute of Research and Town Planning in Curitiba in the mid-1960s; the creation new towns along the Transamazonian Highway in the early 1970s; the Seminars on Urban Design held in Brasilia in the early 1980s; and the construction of Palmas in 1989, the last capital city planned in 20th century Brazil. Brasilia (1957-1960) was planned during the democratic period, but its initial development is strongly linked to the dictatorial regime (1964-1986). The new towns later implemented in the Amazon by the federal government, adopted the rationalist urban layout, again endorsing the national- building discourse. In contrast, the pragmatic urban proposals implemented in Curitiba were in line with the postmodernist rationale. The criticism of the modernist town planning was more emphatically expressed when the first of the Seminars on Urban Design was held. Nevertheless, the layout of Palmas, a city planned in the re-democratization, postmodernist period, still emulated features of Brasilia. The framing of this ambivalent panorama is a much-needed contribution to the country's recent planning history.

Keywords

planning diffusion, urban design, new towns, postmodernist urbanism, Jaime Lerner

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INTRODUCTION

One might wonder, which ideas shaped the planning practice in Brazil after the construction of Brasilia? How was the criticism of rationalist urbanism assimilated in a country that had built the epitome of modernist town planning?

To answer these questions, four important facts in the country's planning history in the second half of the twentieth century can be explored: the creation of the Municipal Institute of Research and Town Planning in Curitiba (IPPUC) in 1965; the creation of new towns along the Transamazonian Highway in 1972; the first of the Seminars on Urban Design (SEDUR) held in Brasilia in 1984; and the construction of Palmas in 1989, the last provincial capital planned in 20th century Brazil.

Brasilia (1957-1960) was planned during the democratic period, but its initial development is strongly linked to the dictatorial regime (1964-1986). The dictatorship not only insulated Brazil from contemporary, progressive ideas but also favoured modernist architecture as the most appropriate image for the country of the future. In 1972, as part of the nation-building discourse, the federal government adopted a radical urbanization enterprise in the Amazon, based on the rationalist urban layout.¹ As a result, postmodernist ideas and critiques of modernism were delayed. The pragmatic urban proposals implemented in Curitiba in the second half of the 1960s included issues of identity, belonging, context, and environmental planning, in line with the postmodernist rationale.² The criticism of Brasilia and modernist town planning was more emphatically expressed in 1984, when the first of the Seminars on Urban Design was held; SEDUR represents an "official" turning point in planning discourse and practice.³ Nevertheless, the layout of Palmas, a city planned in the re-democratization, postmodernist period, still emulated the characteristics of Brasilia.⁴

The framing of this panorama and the discussion of this conflicted, ambivalent situation is a much-needed contribution. This paper therefore gathers and examines several contributions that have been independently published elsewhere. This original approach sheds light on the country's recent planning history.

CURITIBA AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE LOCAL PLANNING INSTITUTE

Since the mid-1940s, Curitiba has undergone a series of events that would change the image of the inexpressive capital of the affluent Parana State. The creation of the local Course of Architecture and Urbanism (1962), the establishment of the Municipal Planning Institute (1965) and the preparation of a new Master Plan actively contributed to the expected urban transformations, stimulated by the increasing urban development.

The urban environmental quality and sustainable development of Curitiba are largely based on (historical, physical, social, and cultural), contextualism, local identity, sense of belonging,

cultural memory, revitalization, recycling, as well as preservation of the natural surroundings and environmental planning (Fig. 1). Understated criticism of modernist thought and the early reception of some globally debated postmodernist ideas updated local architecture and urbanism.

The architect, urbanist and civil engineer Jaime Lerner was part of the IPPUC team and served as its president in 1968-1969 (while continuing to teach at the university). Lerner had worked in the Paris studio of Georges Candilis, Alexis Josic and Shadrach Woods in 1962. These architects, associated with the TEAM X group, promoted the “utopia of the possible” by abandoning the universal claims of urbanism and accepting the preferences and necessities of people, rather than changing the way they lived. According to them, spatial practices should be the result of socio-cultural logics. Candilis-Josic-Woods’ ideas certainly left an indelible mark on Lerner’s practice. He also campaigned against the modernist disregard for the traditional street, the functional segregation of cities, and the dominance of private automobiles over pedestrians in urban spaces. Lerner was twice appointed mayor of Curitiba (1971-1975; 1979-1984) and then elected for a third term (1989-1993). Interestingly, since 1965, eleven of Curitiba’s fourteen mayors have either been associated with IPPUC or the city planning activity, ensuring continuity and implementation of town planning decisions – an unusual and positive case in the country’s planning history.⁵

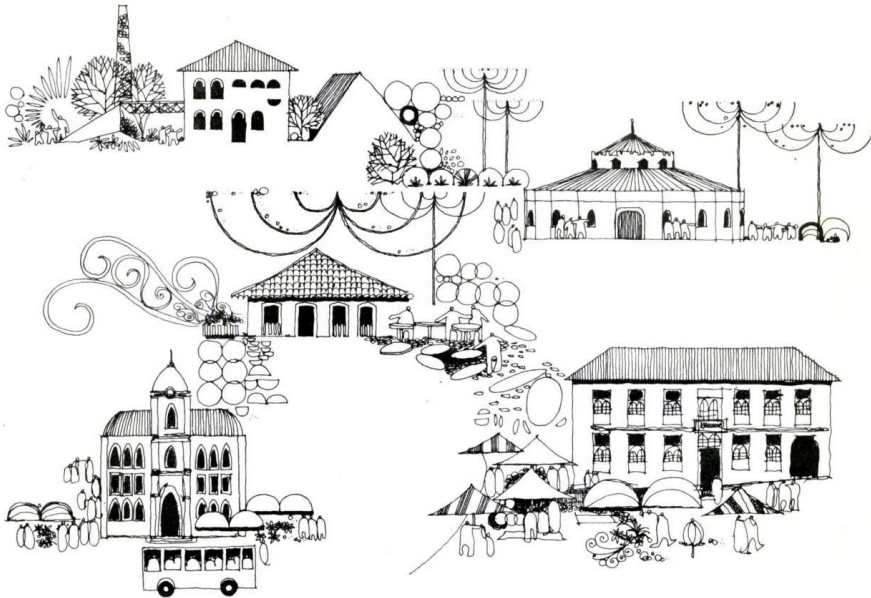


Fig. 1. IPPUC's representation of Curitiba's landmarks and local features, 1980s.

The large number of urban proposals implemented in Curitiba have been deemed attractive, innovative, functional, cost-effective, and replicable. They were grounded in the real city and included public transportation, historic and cultural preservation, revitalization and pedestrianization of downtown areas, and catalyst architectural designs. IPPUC also implemented an effective environmental approach to planning, departing from the prevailing practice of treating urban drainage and sanitation separately. A comprehensive vision of environmental problems led to the design of an urban park system which jointly addressed urban river flooding and the creation of leisure areas.⁶

Curitiba's urban design proposals of the 1970s reveal the ideas and themes debated at the time, such as ecological thinking, city and urban history, and identity politics. Curitiba's projects reflected the postmodern turn towards social and environmental issues. Curitiba's urban projects drew inspiration from the site, the social context and mass culture, and re-everything – revitalize, recycle, reuse and renew. Unlike Brasilia, Curitiba was designed 'in the vernacular', based on the past (historicism) and the locale or site (regionalism). Regional symbols, conventional features and an infatuation with the past contributed to a valuable sense of place. However, the external impact of Curitiba's planning only became more pronounced in the decades that followed.



Fig. 2. Aerial view of one of the Transamazonian new towns, 1970s.

NEW TOWNS IN THE AMAZON

Brazil had been under a dictatorship since 1964, and the military regime implemented a development plan that was responsible for significant growth rates from 1968 to 1973. During this period, known as the “economic miracle,”

the annual GDP jumped from 9.8% in 1968 to 14% in 1973. In 1972, the federal government launched a colonisation scheme that created a series of new towns along the Transamazonian Highway, then under construction. State-led colonisation was intended to promote regional development, economic growth, and national integration. According to Hecht,⁷ “the new agricultural frontier in the Amazon was to provide a solution to vital economic and ideological questions, thus serving important political and legitimizing functions for the new regime”. Like Brasilia, these modernist new towns embodied the government’s efforts to occupy the territory, develop the country and build the nation (Fig. 2).⁸

The Amazonia colonization scheme altered the traditional regional urbanization pattern of river towns and inland waterway transportation systems. The simplified artificiality of the settlement layout and the linearity of the highway contrasted with the aquatic connectivity, the dendritic structure of the region, and its complex systems of integrated mobility. The location of the new towns followed a geometric layout pattern that did not properly consider the physiography. A large dose of utopia infused the colonization project, which discarded traditional urban configurations and established functionalist/rationalist urban forms aimed at reforming the physical urban environment to transform life in society. The rationale of modernist town planning impeded dense, diverse, vibrant urban environments. Aspects of functionalist town planning seemed pointless in small towns in the middle of the forest; separation of pedestrians and automobiles, functional zoning, neighbourhood units and cul-de-sacs were certainly more appropriate to more complex, dense, and developed urban areas.

National development, pursued by democratic and dictatorial administrations, was translated into progressive urban forms, i.e. rationalist urbanism. The functional city grew out of the modernist struggle to subjugate nature, and the image of progress rarely coincided with habitual urban forms. Brazil’s insularity during the military dictatorship (harsher from 1968 forward) and the regime’s patronage of rationalist architecture and urbanism (along with its revolutionary goal) delayed the local critique of modernist production. Contemporary post-modern thought and its associated ecological concerns, environmental planning, cultural ties, sense of belonging, and praise of traditional construction methods and building types would then have materialized a counter-image of progress. By supporting the old ideology of building the country, the military regime’s plan for national integration and development overlooked important social components in favour of a productive apparatus and infrastructure. Despite substantial funding, the colonization scheme was abandoned as a failure within a few years of its inception. Since then, deforestation and a low Human Development Index have been among the most important issues in the region.⁹

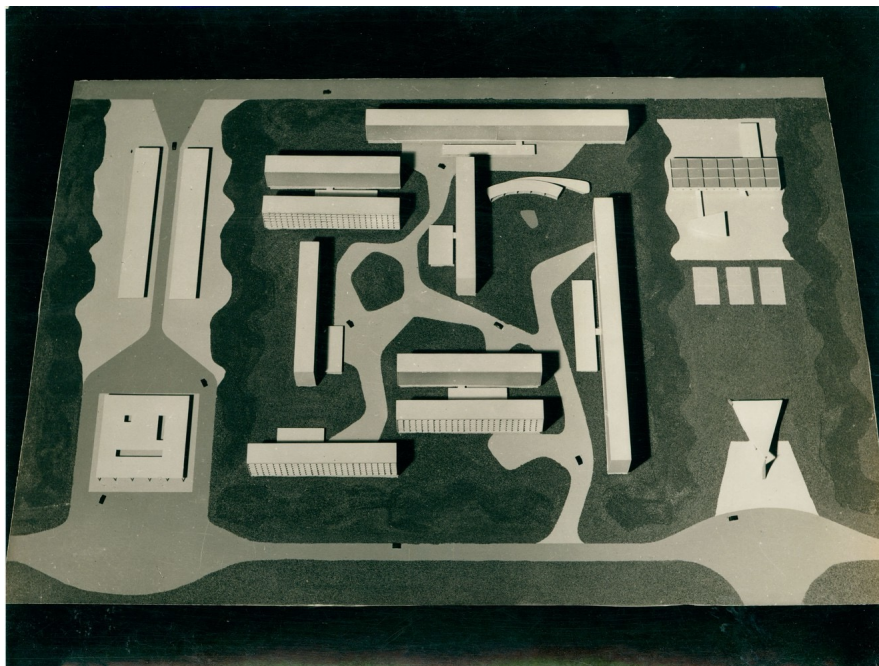


Fig. 3. Model of Brasilia's superblock, 1957

THE EMERGENCE OF URBAN DESIGN INITIATIVES

The Seminars on Urban Design (SEDUR) are considered a milestone in the institutionalization of urban design in mid-1980s Brazil. The SEDUR meetings (1984, 1986, 1988, 1991) were all held in Brasilia (Fig. 3) in the context of the re-democratization of the country – after two decades of dictatorship. The new political situation fostered critical debates on various aspects of Brazilian society, including the architecture, urbanism, and town planning. The first session affirmed the failure of rationalist principles and criticized the functional city.

The seminars discourse focused on the physical aspect of cities, advocating urban morphology, the preservation and renovation of traditional settings, and a different approach to informal settlements, urban expansion, and new towns. It noted the importance of design as a fundamental tool for improving urban form – and thus the quality of urban life. A new agenda for urban design was proposed, focusing on existing urban forms, and abandoning preconceived rationalist urban models; a new approach to public spaces was recommended, including valuing local communities. The traditional urban tissue, contiguous and continuous, was once again praised. The re-emergence of urban social movements and the return to democracy corresponded to the consideration of the vernacular.¹⁰

The urbanization of favelas was a relevant topic in the seminars as a new approach to intervening in informal settlements. It was noted that this experience echoed some of the theses defended by the English architect John F. C. Turner, who visited Brazilian favelas in the 1960s as an advisor to the Housing National Bank (BNH). “They showed me problems – slums, mocambos, flooded areas, etc. – which I consider solutions. And they showed me solutions – low-cost housing projects – which I call problems” because the BNH projects were rationalist, standardised, proposals with little or no sense of place.¹¹ His testimony had a strong impact in the 1970s, putting the performance of public agencies responsible for housing in Brazil in a new perspective, both for the architect and the urban planner.¹²

The seminars attracted participants from almost all over the country. The participants were mainly architects and town planners working as university lecturers and public institution technicians. Interestingly, no representative of IPPUC attended the seminars, nor did any of the papers presented at the events deal with what had been happening in Curitiba over the last twenty years, even though IPPUC had anticipated and converged with the main ideas of SEDUR. Two aspects may have contributed to this absence: 1) The architects of IPPUC were very pragmatic and rarely published about their work, even though they had academic roles;¹³ 2). Most of the seminar attendees presented personal experiences and practical case studies, rather than reflections on the production and theoretical essays of other people¹⁴ SEDUR was not particularly dedicated to planning history, and postgraduate courses in

Brazil, as well as academic research, especially in architecture and urbanism, really flourished after the military dictatorship. Local books on town planning history, urbanism, and urban design date from a more recent period.

A NEW CAPITAL CITY: PALMAS

The Brazilian Constitution of 1988 created a new state in the federation, Tocantins. A capital city was to be designed, and like the new capitals in the hinterlands of developing countries, it was planned to promote economic growth and regional development. Driven by political and economic imperatives and imbued with expectations of transformation, the creation of a new capital city was once again perceived as a potential opportunity for progress. Naturally, it deserved an innovative urban form.

The outline of Palmas rejected and at the same time strongly embraced the design of Brasília. A gigantic grid, wide avenues, functional zoning, and the adaptation of the neighbourhood unit concept are the salient features of Palmas (Fig. 4). Its layout was site-purposed and designed with the environment in mind; its grid was adapted to natural conditions and the resulting urban form is strongly related to the landscape. However, other post-machine-era considerations contributed little or nothing to the project. Palmas is a city for the automobile. Modernist in its super-wide avenues and large distances between civic buildings, the extensive street network is highly dependent on the automobile and overlooks the pedestrian.¹⁵



Fig. 4. Aerial view of Palmas, 2015

Palmas' neighbourhood units are an evolved version of Brasília's. Its plan insisted on single-use neighbourhoods when this concept had long been challenged in favour of more urban diversity. Its layout has fostered diversity of form in the inner core of the macroblocks – to the extreme of the uniqueness of each macroblock – but not in their uses, resulting in reduced vitality. Although they avoid modernist standardization, the varied contours of the macroblocks lack legibility. Palmas' civic centre avoids the monumentality of Brasília, although the arrangement of its public buildings and government palace on a vast green square recalls the organization of the modernist city. Nevertheless, Palmas' design eluded the monumentality, uniformity, and standardization of Brasília.

From the beginning, the design of the city disregarded the modernist utopia of creating a new social order through urbanism and architecture, but Palmas' urban life was still largely idealized, as evidenced by its functional sectors, land use segregation, and the insular structure of the neighbourhood units.¹⁶ The city's individuality and image were strongly based on natural features. As a modern urban capital intended to be the symbol of largely rural territory, Palmas' layout relied extensively on modernist urban features, and disregarded the kind of ideas developed in Curitiba, for example, the consideration of ordinary citizens and their conventional city life.

Palmas' designers had studied town planning in London and were familiar with Milton Keynes plan, which they used to inform their design. They attended the last session of SEDUR, where they presented the modern city still under construction. The strong criticism of the rationalist urbanism that characterized the first SEDUR was absent this time.

CONCLUSION

The city of Palmas has suffered some problems due to the low population density, vitality and legibility, and the lack of a pedestrian-friendly urban structure. This has necessitated a revision of the urban regulations and plan. The neighbourhood unit has not turned out as planned. The same can be said of the Transamazonian new towns. These new towns demonstrate that modernism alone does not produce a better city; it simply produces a city with a distinct urban form. Most of these towns were abandoned when the colonization scheme was dropped. The few towns that evolved show no sign of the neighbourhood unit layout. Cul-de-sacs were opened and streets crossed the common public areas, which ended up being parcelled out. Exclusive residential areas were modified into mixed-use neighbourhoods as commercial establishments sprang up between the houses. In contrast, Curitiba became a model of urban sustainability and planning.¹⁷

These situations, their origins and outcomes coincide with many of the modernist planning aspects debated at the Seminar on Urban Design. Moreover, urbanization and urban problems in Brazil in the 1970s were the scope of town planning, which then focused on technocratic, deterministic, macro-analysis. At that time, socioeconomic approaches prevailed over the design and the physical aspects of the urban form. SEDUR proposed to change this approach. As a legacy of SEDUR, a course on Urban Design or Urban Project was widely introduced into the curricula of architecture and urbanism at Brazilian universities. The SEDUR debate contributed to the organization of the Seminars on Urbanism and City History, which are still held every two years.

Before the criticism of rationalist urbanism, Brasilia was admired as an image of progress and modern urban life. Its innovative town layout was then rejected in favour of more typical urban forms. Curitiba was recognized worldwide as a model city and ecological capital, without any of the urban elements for which Brasilia was famous. It seems that every era produces its own model town (ready to be selectively reused at any time). The layout of Palmas', despite initial environmental concerns, has mostly been cited for its drawbacks related to the principles of rationalist urbanism. Even when it came to producing a new capital city from scratch, the modernist layout more easily provided the representation of an advanced new town.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR(S)

Dr Rego is a full professor at the State University of Maringá, Brazil. His teaching focuses on modern ar-

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ENDNOTES

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2. Irazábal, "Urban Design;" Rego, "Curitiba;" Ellin, *Postmodern Urbanism*; Vianna, *O Plano de Curitiba*.
3. Leme et al, "Seminars on Urban Design;" "Desenho Urbano I;" "Desenho Urbano II;" "Desenho Urbano III;" Turkienicz & Malta, *Desenho Urbano*; Holanda & Kohlsdorf, *Seminário de desenho Urbano*.
4. Rego, "Palmas;" Rego, "New Capital Cities."
5. Rego, "All Cities Should Have a Dream;" Rego et al, "Lerner, Friedman, and Candilis-Josic-Woods."
6. Irazábal, "Urban Design;" Macedo, "Planning a Sustainable City;" Rego, "Curitiba;" Vianna, *O Plano de Curitiba*.
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