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The Designed Capital Cities of Post–World War II Chandigarh and Brasília

The period following World War II saw an impressive trend of “designed capital cities.” Chandigarh, capital of Punjab, and Brasília, capital of Brazil, are two prime examples of this era. Both cities were created for nationalistic reasons; both required a new profound identity. While Chandigarh “marked an important opportunity and forward-moving symbol after the violence of partition,” Brasília was Brazil’s answer to “a perennial longing for Brazilian geopolitical integration” (*Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 122, 132). While the initiatives behind and development of both cities are fascinating and impressive in scale, the resulting effects of such designed capitals are equally acknowledgeable. While neither Chandigarh nor Brasília are “failures,” – and certainly far from it – the unexpected turnouts of both cities must be noted. Given the study of “the reality behind the plan,” it also becomes important to speculate on the future progression of both Chandigarh and Brasília.

The idea of Brasília was certainly not a sudden one; the need for a new Brazilian capital was acknowledged as early as 1789. In 1808, the Portuguese escaped the Napoleon regime by settling in Rio de Janeiro. Already during these premature years, the desire for a more inland capital was observed, with Dom João wishing to move the capital of Rio further south. Father João Ribeiro expressed a similar wish in 1817; the new capital should be built “at least thirty to forty leagues away from the sea-coast, as a residence for the congress and the Government” (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 106). Further plans were discussed in 1821, and, coinciding with the

proclamation of the Brazilian Republic in 1889, official groundwork was finally launched (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 107).

The justifications for a new interior capital were shared among most supporters; “Some had favored the move chiefly as a means for signaling the symbolic end of rule from cities associated with Portuguese domination, while others had stressed the need to forge a unified Brazil out of an assemblage of distant and disconnected enclaves” (*Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 133). The common consensus was that the new capital would provide self-sufficiency and a concept of national identity.

The main discrepancy, however, laid in the indecisiveness of the precise location of the new Brazilian capital city. While there was much agreement on an inland location, a specific site was quite a different story. The Constitution of 1891 helped prompt a first dedicated attempt at finding the exact site suitable for what was to become Brasília, followed by 1892 field studies in Pirenópolis and the Cruls report in 1894 (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 108). These efforts, however, once again provided no proactive outcome, and not until the 1920s was interest in the development of Brasília restored. Several men of political importance saw the creation of the new capital as an opportunity to exercise power in Brazil. Getúlio Vargas, elected in 1930, established a new constitution in which his goal was to transfer the capital to a “centrally located point in Brazil” (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 108). The constitution, however, was predictably suspended in 1937, followed by the election of Marechal Eurico Gaspar Dutra in 1946, whose own constitution called for a new commission for the New Capital. The commission was to be led by General Djalma Polli Coelho (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 109).

The Coelho Commission ignored previous studies done by the Cruls Commission and focused on three major deciding factors for the capital’s prime location: the populated region,

efficient communication, and proximity to an interstate border (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 109). 1953 saw the final establishment of the Federal District under both Commissions, and Dr. Edson de Alencar Cabral suggested turning to foreign assistance. While seeking foreign aid faced much controversy, it was understood that foreigners would be timelier than the characteristically indecisive Brazilians, while also being “less susceptible to local political pressures” (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 110). In the same year, Dr. Cabral formed an alliance with Donald J. Belcher & Associates of Ithaca, New York, and a contract was approved immediately the year following (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 111).

The contract outlined demanding tasks of the Belcher firm, including the study of the 53,500 square kilometer quadrangle of the 1953 demarcation of the Federal District and a selection of five possible alternative sites – all with time efficiency as the number one priority. Finally, in 1955, an official site was chosen twenty-five kilometers southeast of the city of Planaltina. It should be noted that the chosen site was the same site recommended by the Cruls report more than sixty years ago (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 112).

The 1956 election of Juscelino Kubitschek de Oliveira created the opportune moment for the ultimate fabrication of Brasília. During a time of continuing change in Brazil – most notably: unfinished plans – Kubitschek displayed the “remarkable dynamism and self-confidence” needed to implement the planning of the new capital (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 113). With his five-year constraint to office, the new president was possibly the first to fully grasp the necessity of speed in the building of Brasília. The formation of NOVACAP (Companhia Urbanizadora da Nova Capital) immediately followed Kubitschek’s presidency, and the construction of the capital was finally underway. A rising population and shortage of housing was officially marking Rio

inadequate as the capital of Brazil, and the new capital plan was rapidly gaining support from Brazilian citizens across the country (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 115).

As is common in many 19th and 20th century cities, the design for Brasília was chosen via a simple competition of twenty-six entrants, the 1957 prize awarded to Lúcio Costa. Before going into the details of the Costa Plan, it can be noted that, with emphasis on functional zoning and “textbook diagrams” that were rarely applicable to the chosen site of Brasília, the other designs submitted for the competition were for the most part predictable and mundane (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 140). Contrary to these dull designs, NOVACAP was in search of a monumental plan for the city that could create the symbolic setting that Rio lacked. The Costa Plan promised precisely such a nationalistic image to the judges. Costa described Brasília’s foundation as “a deliberate act of conquest, a gesture of pioneers acting in the spirit of their colonial traditions” (*Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 134).

The Costa Plan was presented in extreme simplicity, which was emphasized as one of its winning aspects (while also a source of the plan’s varied criticisms.) It employed a cross-axial scheme aged back in time as far as the ancient Egyptians, with a curved axis serving as a radial artery, along which the residential district was situated. Costa concentrated on traffic control, specifying the separation among several different traffic types and levels. The intersection of the residential radial artery and the monumental axis was a multilevel traffic station, with the lower level dedicated solely to the central bus terminal and the upper level dedicated to a platform for entertainment. Adjacent to this station was the banking and financial center, and the central business district (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 147).

The Costa Plan created the “Plaza of the Three Powers,” which organized the Congress Building, Governor Palace, and Supreme Court. The Governor Palace and Supreme Court would

be rectangular, low-rise buildings, whereas the Congress Building would carry a shallow dome accompanied by a single high-rise slab (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 148). The plaza would be surrounded by royal palms, a tribute to Le Corbusier's 1936 design of the Ministry of Education. Further resembling the Le Corbusier approach, Costa's design gave a strong sense of imagery involving the human body; the "lungs" of the new capital comprised of two symmetric, green parks situated about the monumental radial artery. West of the axis would be several buildings devoted to public services, while the extended eastern area was to be devoted to industrial use.

Costa's residential district was a reflection of many elements in Le Corbusier's designs. Superblocks situated about the major axis consisted of apartment housing, containing a maximum of six stories above the classic *pilotis*. There was a distinct segregation of automobile and pedestrian traffic, and each superblock was surrounded by a greenbelt (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 149). In a larger sense, each group of four superblocks shared particular amenities.

The Costa Plan conveyed Le Corbusier's understanding of the rapidly growing Machine Age, and Costa exhibited no desire to "harmonize the works of man with those of nature" (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 151). Because of the five-year time constraint with which the designer was faced, the plan undoubtedly exhibits many shortcomings, the most apparent of which is probably its failure in providing guidelines for expansion (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 152). The Costa Plan was a "simplistic scheme of the 1920s and 1930s," and had no regard for the distant future of the new capital city. The design quickly fell into a trap of humdrum ideas which exhibited "no new philosophy of life... neither revolution nor social reform," but instead presented Brasília with a superficial "physical framework" and no more (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 153).

The actual development of Brasília was done so in a "wartime mentality," with a feverish pace matched by no other Latin American city of its time (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 155). Under

Oscar Niemeyer's direction, the city exemplified many characteristics of Le Corbusier's 1930 Ville Radieuse. Because the city was supplied with a large number of unskilled migrant construction workers, simple designs and easily mastered techniques were needed. The Brasília Palace Hotel and government ministries used a steel frame construction, while all other buildings were reinforced in concrete (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 158).

The new capital of Brasília was unprecedented in that it exhibited a "boom-town enterprise and optimism," comparable to that of the Wild West in North America (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 159). While the capital was not even a finished establishment, but merely a city in the making, its citizens, adopting the name *candangos* for themselves, already exhibiting a sense of democratic identity otherwise absent in much of the country (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 159). The new city quickly attracted workers from all over Brazil, and many work camps and temporary settlements were built in the expectation that they would be destroyed following the inauguration of the completed city. One such town was Cidade Livre, which, in 1958, housed 340 business establishments (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 159).

The development of Brasília was very much a series of extravagantly publicized events, led in every step by Kubitschek. The 1957 establishment of the first Catholic mass on the Brasília site, for example, was met with the attendance of 15,000 people, and Kubitschek announced, "The spiritual seed of Brasília is planted" (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 160). The president's rhetoric was unsurpassed by earlier political figures of Brazil, and Brasília was soon acknowledged on a global level across Europe and the Americas.

The formal inauguration of Brasília, held on April 21, 1960, presented a city of substantial infrastructure as well as several distinct completed works: the Presidential Palace, the Brasília Palace Hotel, and the governmental complex. While none were ready for occupancy,

eleven government ministry buildings were built. 94 apartment blocks containing 500 one-story and 222 two-story houses were completed, accompanied by schools and shopping centers (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 163).

Perhaps one of the most notable characteristics of the designed capitals following World War II is the distinct difference between the plan and the reality. While the stated intention of Brasília was to move the government from Rio to a new operative environment for administration, only four of the eleven ministry buildings were functioning, and the bulk of the government in fact returned to Rio (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 164). The end of Kubitschek's term in 1961 saw a rapid declination in enthusiasm among the planning staff. Understandably so, the political leaders who were to follow were unable to find the same personal ties to Brasília that Kubitschek had developed during his presidency; essentially, the capital was his own creation. Jânio Quadros (1961) focused primarily on foreign policy, while João Goulart (1961-1964) invested most of his interest in internal social reform (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 164-5). The new 1964 military Branco regime revived some of the nationalistic passion of Brasília's developing years, but the typical Brazilian governmental organization, characterized by confusing and overlapping functions, was quickly adhering to the new capital city. Brasília was developed with close dependency on presidential support and therefore found itself in a complex sort of identity crisis.

Along with its decreasing sense of nationalism, Brasília's plan was hit with another harsh reality concerning its residential housing. The original Costa Plan of superblocks was integrated along with open areas, schools, local automobile traffic, and parking. However, there was no long-range plan; the western area was rapidly becoming urbanized but there was no ordered pattern of land use or road system (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 172). It is perhaps ironic that the

Costa Plan employed a seemingly “strict” symmetrical design that was virtually planless. Like too many unfortunate designs of Le Corbusier, the plan for Brasília was a “romantic image of the automobile in motion,” with no regard to the realistic problems associated with parking (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 173).

The satellites of Brasília provide another theoretically efficient plan, but, in reality, “are not true satellites, but essentially dormitory towns for workers in Brasília, and most of the residents are subjected to an inconvenient and expensive regimen of bus commuting” (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 175). The satellite towns were meant to provide a rural expansion for the overpopulated Federal District, which grew from 64,314 in 1959 to 538,351 in 1970 (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 179). The satellites were a derivation of the popular Garden City theory, but its urban amenities were far inferior to those of center Brasília. While Brasília itself is one of the only cities in Brazil with close to zero favelas, the outer satellites are commonly confused as such, highly evident in the earlier mentioned Cidade Livre, which was turned into a satellite town in response to its unexpected high population.

What is even more of a problem than the satellites themselves is their effect on the segregation established from Brasília as its primary city, reflecting a prominent class distinction of Brazilian communities. The urban center is highly concentrated in upper-class families, whereas the suburban areas house the low-income families; the physical separation established due to the low-cost satellite towns is very clear-cut (*Two Brazilian Capitals*, 179). “While it is generally held to be true that the residential system did initially achieve some of the intended intermixture of classes in the same superquadra and club, traditional polarizations quickly took over” (*Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 137).

In contrast to the perhaps long and premeditated development of Brasília, the creation of Chandigarh was “conceived amid the crisis and confusion accompanying the birth of the new Indian republic” (*Chandigarh*, 6). In 1947, the Punjab province was split between India and Pakistan, and there was a definitive tension in both religious and political conflict. Like Brasília, there was a need for a symbolic gesture to provide the citizens of Punjab with confidence and a sense of identity.

The planners of Chandigarh, namely P.L. Varma and P.N. Thaper, almost immediately recognized the necessity to call for foreign help in building their capital city. India had already been under much international influence, examples including the British, Dutch, Portuguese, and French. More specific influences can be seen in the 18th and 19th-century classicism of Calcutta and Madras, the Victorian metropolis of Bombay, and the Beaux-Arts design of New Delhi (*Chandigarh*, 9). The steady impact of outside countries created a “general unsureness” in Indian nationalism and, over the past 200 years, India was “forcibly fed on a diet of mixed blessings from the West” (*Chandigarh*, 9).

The first significant master plan was created under Albert Mayer in 1949. In his 1950 address in Washington, D.C., Mayer described his intention to create “... a city in the Indian idiom, fused with our own simplicity and functional honesty” (*Chandigarh*, 13). Mayer design showed a fan-shaped outline between two river beds, with the governmental buildings located at the upper edge of the city, the central business district near the center, a curving network of main rounds surrounding residential superblocks, and an industry area in the east (*Chandigarh*, 13). A defining characteristic of the Mayer Master Plan is exemplified by its lack of a geometric grid, instead following the more “organic, irregular, and small-scale variety of the medieval settlement” of Sitte in his publication of Der Städtebau. Perhaps because of his obsessive fear of

monotony (and his constant attempts in avoiding it at all costs), the Mayer plan was concentrated on the “quality of domestic life within the city,” and, therefore, lacked a “sense of large-scale unifying order” – the monumentality which the Indian planners had in fact hoped for (*Chandigarh*, 18.)

As an alternative to the minimalistic Mayer Plan, the Indian planners eventually found themselves associated with “The Second Team,” mainly comprising of Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret, Maxwell Fry, and Jane Drew. While the original intent of The Second Team was to execute the Mayer Plan, Le Corbusier was quick in forcing his own ideas instead, seeing the new city as “an opportunity to see one of his urban plans completely realized” (*Chandigarh*, 29). The biggest change brought upon by Le Corbusier was his distinct rectilinear and geometric ordering, turning Mayer’s curving streets into straight ones.

Le Corbusier’s Chandigarh contained two main streets crossing at the civic center, with “emphasis on a monumental axial composition” – the capitol complex (*Chandigarh*, 32). The capitol complex had a “ceremonial approach” of wide, tree-lined boulevards similar to those of the Princes Street or the Champs Elysées (*Chandigarh*, 32).

Quickly evident in the planning and ultimate development of Chandigarh is the lack of immediate application of the functional plan, in contrast to the reality of the city. Most obvious is Le Corbusier’s love for the automobile – a luxury not yet widespread throughout India. The architect also conveyed his love for parks and nature in building the “Valley of Leisure,” which was rarely accessible to the citizens. More importantly, population distribution proved to be ineffective. There was an attempt to mix the population somewhat, but class was still mostly determined by distance from the upper edge of the city (*Chandigarh*, 35).

While Le Corbusier's "monumental urbanity" brought confidence and "strength of purpose" to the Indians in their state of "unsureness and confusion" due to the ongoing identity crisis of Punjab, "the present design of Chandigarh represents too grand a conception for a relatively small provincial capital" (*Chandigarh*, 39). Housing sectors were established according to occupational rank, which provided a sort of juxtaposition within Chandigarh that broke the traditional barriers of Indian towns (*Chandigarh*, 45). Perhaps what the planners failed to account for was the 85 percent of people who still lived in rural villages; the traditions and customs of the Indians were in the suburbs, not the city (*Chandigarh*, 47). In this sense, Le Corbusier might have been better off implementing some of the more domestic plans of Mayer.

Most of the housing of Chandigarh was designed by Jeanneret alone, but the design executed was clearly too European for the Indian city, and "the appearance of many of the houses and streets of Chandigarh seems to indicate that the inhabitants are villagers only recently introduced to city life, who have yet to develop a sense of civic responsibility or any real awareness of urban aesthetics" (*Chandigarh*, 52). Moreover, Jeanneret and the other designers failed to recognize the near absence of furniture in the traditional Indian village.

Indian private housing was commonly "overcomplicated both in form and decoration" (*Chandigarh*, 54), and Jeanneret attempted in solving this problem by various laws of Frame Control, including standard sizes of doors and windows, a frame surrounding houses on all sides, the limitation of projections of the façade, and the prohibition of "applied decorations" (*Chandigarh*, 55). What resulted was an overly uniform and repetitive residential scheme.

The dullness of Chandigarh's designs was further evident in Jane Drew's plan for the bazaars. Ignoring the original "colorful congestion" of the Indian commercial street, Jane Drew

created an atmosphere of the new Chandigarh bazaar, which “reproduces much of the antiseptic vacancy of an American suburban shopping center” (*Chandigarh*, 56).

Perhaps what the designers of Chandigarh failed to realize was the transition needed to convert a traditionally agricultural and village-inclined Indian population into a more Western urbanized society based on social, economic, and political stability. A series of surveys done in May 1957 revealed that the citizens of Punjab were unsure about the unstable political situation in the province and had little confidence in security or law enforcement (*Chandigarh*, 58-9). Further surveys in 1961 showed that the citizens lacked confidence in one another, had “little incentives for purely social contacts,” and a general “lack of focal points for general community interest” was clear (*Chandigarh*, 60-1). Given the community-based neighborhood unit that was the foundation of the city plan, the lack of social unity grounded in Indian tradition proved to be a major problem overlooked by the team of designers. The planners were “convinced that by focusing on modernity,” they could simply “sidestep the pitfalls of ancient identities” (*Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 123). Perhaps India’s “ancient identity” was in fact the *lack* thereof.

The Second Team devised a plan in which the citizens had “nothing in common but physical propinquity and general similarity of income,” creating a population segregated perhaps just as much as the traditional caste system (*Chandigarh*, 62). The capital quickly turned into another government housing project under Jeanneret. Furthermore, there was no reassessment of the original, “hastily-laid-out” sectors, and these growing residential sectors turned into “opportunities wasted and challenges denied” (*Chandigarh*, 63).

The nationalism and identity absent in Chandigarh comes from the strictly physical planning of the city. While the development of an entirely new city could have been a source of

experimentation for the Indians, it was instead adhered to in a terribly formulaic manner. There was no attention to social and economic ideals, and the overwhelming majority of Chandigarh was unable to find roots in community. The “sense of a society in transition is dominant” (*Chandigarh*, 95) and “Le Corbusier could not turn a provincial Indian capital into another Paris” (*Chandigarh*, 99).

The plans behind Brasília and Chandigarh are key examples of post-World War II designed capital cities. Both cities were faced with crumbling social, economic, and political systems, to which the only feasible solution was a new capital city. Brasília recognized its need for a new capital city upon the growing city of Rio de Janeiro, a city lacking both an effective sense of administration and a monumental sense of symbolism for Brazil. Chandigarh needed an immediate sense of confidence and identity for its divided province. While the plans for both cities certainly showed a heightened sense of nationalism during their developmental phases, evidence of more permanent identities is more or less lacking. In the case of Brasília, “the radical special politics of Brasília’s architects and planners were not matched by the society that was to inhabit the plan” (*Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 137). Moreover, “Brasília’s modernity places the city at a specific moment in the history of architecture and urbanism, but it cultivates Brazilian-ness in only the most abstract of ways” (*Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 143). In the case of the Indian capital, a heavy dependency on outside ideas is perhaps the problem, with a plan derived predominantly “from Indian bureaucratic interpretation of the English New Towns Act, derived in turn from the Garden City movement” (*Architecture, Power, and National Identity*, 125). The future can only hold whether these designed capital cities will ultimately transition into their self-derived identities.

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