



Neighbourhood Units in Brazilian New Towns: foreign idea and local urban life

Renato Leão Rego*

* *Professor, Universidade Estadual de Maringá, Brazil, rlrego@uem.br*

Neighbourhood units and Brazilian new towns were an instrument of national development in line with the governmental nation-building discourse and planning agenda. Urbanisation was thought to be a path to modernisation and innovative urban settings were to establish new urban practices and change social behaviour. But could neighbourhood units really mean new living patterns? Was the neighbourhood unit straightforwardly accepted as a new urban condition? Did it meet passive compliance or strong opposition? Drawing upon the Americanisation of Brazilian society, this paper explores the transfer, interpretation and appropriation of the neighbourhood unit in Brazil through the analysis of the original layouts and present realities of neighbourhood units in the cities of Goiânia (1933-36), Angélica (1954), Brasília (1957), Rurópolis (1972) and Palmas (1988). Contradictions and conflicts are exposed between the planners' visions and the appropriation and use of the urban forms - in short, mismatches between how they were imagined and how they were lived. Due to physical inadequacy and cultural incompatibility, neighbourhood units were either considerably transformed, or rejected and replaced by more traditional, conventional urban configurations, for a foreign-planning idea is only truly incorporated when it makes sense in the cultural realm that has adopted it.

Keywords: planning ideas, international diffusion, appropriation, rejection.

Introduction

The neighbourhood unit, an idea originally formulated in 1920's America within the context of the garden-city movement, has been rebuilt throughout the world and adapted to many distinct planning proposals¹. In Brazil it has been adopted both by academicist urbanism and rationalist/functionalist planning. Be it a city-beautiful type layout or a functional-city plan, a new capital city or a colonisation-project new town, the neighbourhood unit has been constructed in modern layouts created by both federal institutions and private entrepreneurs, fostered by both democratic and authoritarian governments. The exemplary cases of Goiânia (1933-1936), Angélica (1954), Brasília (1957), Rurópolis (1972) and Palmas (1989) depict its recurrence in particular situations through the 20th century, for various purposes and with specific meanings.

As a social product – historically and culturally determined – the planning idea is transformed when transferred in space and time. Grounding in a new destination normally involves a selective process of recreation, which makes it somewhat different from its 'original version'². As noticed elsewhere, interpretations and revisions of the neighbourhood-unit schema were often conjunctural, as it has been constantly tamed into different programmes of modernisation in different times and places³. For a travelling planning idea has to be validated as sufficiently polysemic and capable of sustaining new values in order to effectively function in different contexts to its original one⁴.

Despite the planners' efforts to deal locally with transnational planning ideas, did Brazilian new towns and innovative urban forms really mean new living patterns? How was the foreign neighbourhood unit appropriated? Was it straightforwardly accepted as a new urban condition? Did it meet passive compliance or strong opposition?

The originality of this paper stems from the understanding of the reconstruction of planning ideas in diverse circumstances by different social actors, moved by various interests, with distinct purposes, conveying new values and meanings, and by also considering the reaction of the inhabitants to the new neighbourhood forms. In hindsight, and in the global and more complex panorama of the international diffusion of planning ideas⁵, this paper broadens the history of twentieth-century Brazilian new towns and brings about an assessment of the design process from a cultural viewpoint.

Drawing upon cultural studies and the Americanisation of Brazilian society, this paper's premise is that a foreign idea is only really assimilated when it makes sense in the cultural realm that adopts it⁶. New symbolic values and (invented) traditions root wherever there is fertile social and cultural soil⁷.



New towns, progressive country, modern urban life

Throughout the twentieth century, Brazilian democratic governments and dictatorships created, and fostered the creation of, new towns with the objective of occupying territory and developing the country. Brasília is certainly the epitome of this. Urbanisation was thought to be a path to modernisation and new towns were an instrument of progress⁸. Though planned in the pioneering hinterlands, under the governmental discourse of development and nation-building, Goiânia (1933-1936), Angélica (1954), Brasília (1957), Rurópolis (1972) and Palmas (1989) each belong to a particular conjuncture of the national history.

Goiânia, the new capital of Goiás state, was built in the era of Getúlio Vargas (1930-1954) and cannot be dissociated from the “march to the west”: a policy of the authoritarian, centralising, nationalistic government, which exalted past territorial occupation and imbued it with the future progress of the country to foster the development of its hinterlands⁹. The ‘*Estado Novo*’ (New State), as the period of Vargas’ dictatorship (1937-1945) was named, aimed at creating a new society as part of an urban, industrialised, modern country. Indeed, this period was an important phase for Brazilian industrial capitalism, with a shift from the agro-export economy to an urban-industrial one¹⁰. Devoted to a nationalist, modernisation process, the State then promoted contemporary architecture and urbanism as an identitarian image of the modern Brazil, for they associated modernity with tradition; international avant-garde artistic expressions with Brazilian features¹¹. It was believed that the ideology of rationalist architecture and urbanism would change society¹², and so the New State also pursued it. Grounded in a milestone, emblematic, modernist building, Vargas’ Ministry of Education and Health was concerned with the formation of a new type of man¹³. The Americanisation of Brazilian society was starting to be felt as President Franklin D. Roosevelt implemented the Good-Neighbour Policy in Latin America¹⁴. In such an atmosphere, President Vargas referred to Goiânia as having a state-of-the-art layout¹⁵, while its designer presented it as the result of capitalist expansion in a new era for the national economy¹⁶. Goiânia and its neighbourhood units portrayed the new country under construction in the 1930s.

When Angélica was planted in under-explored, agricultural Mato Grosso state in 1954, the private enterprise colonising the city advanced the march to the west of the country, and the layout for the new town depicted a radical change in urban form, replacing academicist urbanism, the picturesque ambience and the figurative town, for the functional city. The neighbourhood-unit idea had already been echoed in the European discourse on rationalist urbanism, particularly in the third CIAM (1930); Albert Mayer, and later on Le Corbusier, had already adjusted it to the layout of Chandigarh¹⁷. Angélica’s layout embodied, in the rural world, a contrasting scheme: a rationally ordered town, a uniform spatial organisation for a standardised, modern, communitarian life.

Brasília (1957) was the project of a democratic government committed to the country’s development and an internationalist nationalism, that is, an idea of cosmopolitan modernisation stripped off references to local tradition and regionalisms¹⁸, not dissimilar to the case of Angélica. With the slogan of ‘fifty years of progress in five years of government’, president Juscelino Kubitschek (1956-1961) proposed an economic model that favoured associations of Brazilian private companies with multinational and state corporations, which were successful in the short term as national rates for economic growth peaked at 10%¹⁹. Pursuing the growth of basic industry, Kubitschek’s administration undertook a vast programme of infrastructure construction, including roads, hydroelectric power plants, aeronautic projects and car manufacturing. The construction of the new federal capital embodied the democratic progress, the ‘developmentist nationalism’ and a break with the past. Representative of its moment, Brasília was to be an entirely new city: ‘international’, deprived of any pre-existent urban context²⁰.

Brasília epitomised the endeavour to transform physical environment as a manifestation of development²¹. Urban modernity in Latin America was a path to modernising development – not its natural consequence, and with this inversion, the idea of a town became a modernising agent, particularly the new capital of Brazil. Brasília depicted a new urban form that would create a new social order and foster regional progress²². By radically re-conceptualising town life, Brasília was to create a new civilisation²³.

The military regime (1964-1985) retrieved the late 1950’s economic model and the euphoria of the times of Brasília’s construction²⁴. Envisioning a ‘Great Brazil’, it promoted colossal building enterprises to stimulate economic growth and encourage regional development. The resulting economic growth rates were higher than those experienced before, and the period 1968-1973 is known as the economic-miracle years, although the 1973 oil crisis, the high inflation in the following year, massive unemployment and the following economic recession labelled the 1980s as the ‘lost decade’²⁵.



General Garrastazu Médici's tenure (1969-1974) created a series of new towns, including Rurópolis (1972), as part of a mammoth colonisation scheme along the newly open Transamazonian highway, implemented by the National Institute of Colonisation and Agrarian Reform – INCRA. Stemming fundamentally from geopolitical and economic considerations, the Amazonian colonization scheme aimed to develop the region. The craving for progress and the objectives of national integration and economic growth had directed the capitalist expansion to that region. Crossing North Brazil from the Atlantic coast to the inner forest, the road was to change the 'demographically-empty' Amazonian basin and the densely populated Northeast region, thus connecting and balancing the potentialities of the Amazonian territory with the disadvantages of the *sertão* (the arid and remote interior), while simultaneously providing an alternative to the landownership inequities in Brazil. The official discourse referred to 'the distribution of land to men without land' and the 'formation of a community, a society', a new civilisation that was being born²⁶. The layout of Rurópolis depicted an ideal urban life designed upon common standards and strict social behaviour.

The creation of Palmas (1988) coincided with the country's period of re-democratisation, when the strengthening of social movements, the general criticism of modernist architecture and town planning, and a flourish of ecological consciousness could be noticed. The 1988 Federal Constitution led to the creation of a new state, Tocantins, and its capital, Palmas. The new state was then described as rural, living in economic and social chaos, with unexploited mineral and hydro-electrical potential and partially used agricultural fertility dependent on a monoculture: cattle raising²⁷. In this post-dictatorship period of economic recession, amid local setbacks, the creation of a capital city was again seen as a potential opportunity to give rise to progress and regional development²⁸.

Goiânia, Angélica, Brasília, Rurópolis and Palmas' new urban configurations were imagined as a means to a new social order. Their layouts comprised contemporary European and North-American planning ideas as a sign of progress. The North-American neighbourhood unit, in particular, became a recurrent feature of the radically innovative urban settings, which were to establish new urban practices and change social behaviour as part of the country's modernisation process. But did this, in fact, happen?

The neighbourhood unit rejected

The idea of new towns fitted well with Brazil's agenda for development throughout the 20th century and with the planners' attempts to create a better urban environment, which supposed a forward-looking and outward-oriented vision, particularly that nurtured by the North American way of life. Like for Clarence Perry, the neighbourhood unit would improve social life and enhance the spirit of citizenship.

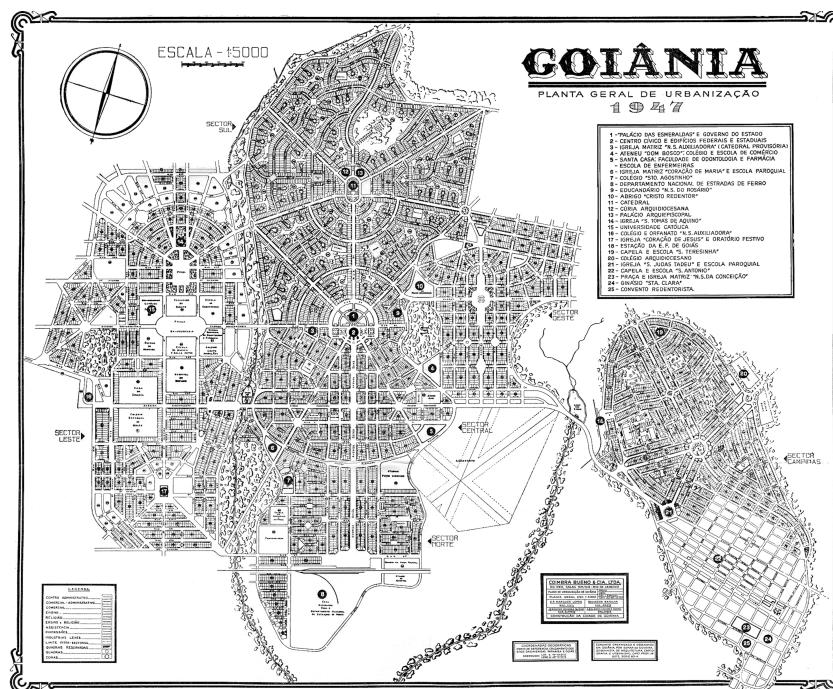


Figure 1: Godoy, A. A. de. *Goiânia, revised plan, 1947*. [Manso: 2001]



The neighbourhood units formulated in Goiânia, Angélica, Brasília, Rurópolis and Palmas were either part academicist-urbanism or part functionalist planning, and served the progressive objectives of democratic and dictatorial regimes. At such distinct conjunctures, the recurrent idea conveyed uncommon urban images related to modernisation and development, always endorsing the motivation for having a community life, proximity to nature, detachment from heavy city traffic, and functional zoning and rationalist separation between pedestrians and motor vehicles. However these cultural values were not fully assimilated.

Civil engineer and town planner Armando Augusto de Godoy transferred the neighbourhood-unit scheme directly from the USA to the design for the South residential area of Goiânia in 1936 when he revised the original 1933 academicist city-layout and endorsed its garden-city-like features²⁹ (Figure 1). Godoy had already established a link between Brazilian town-planners and international planning ideas and practices as an author of several papers in specialised journals about his overseas field trips; namely, 'The Garden City' in 1931 and 'Town Planning in the United States' in 1935, in which text he considered the city of Radburn³⁰.

His layout for the South Goiânia residential area reflects the Radburn model and its informal and picturesque configuration. Cul-de-sacs, enclaves, superblocks, internal parks with community facilities and hierarchical winding roads created an unfamiliar, thus modern, urban form. Local press soon reported that in that neighbourhood 'the most modern urban solution of the present moment will appear: it will be built there, for the second time in the world; the most technical solution for modern cities, which was recently built for the very first time in Redburn [sic], a XX century town, as it is known in the USA'³¹. The new residential sector occupied an area of 325 hectares with a population density of approximately 118 inhabitants per hectare. Like Radburn, the modern (and healthier, greener and bucolic) neighbourhood unconventionally located the main house-façades to the park, with their back door to the cul-de-sacs. However, this foreign layout was ultimately rejected as dwellers insisted on building the house façade to the street, and the internal parks with direct connection to the residential buildings ended up being abandoned and some other park areas were later parcelled off. (A similar rejection and layout transformation was seen in Barry Parker's Jardim América, the first Brazilian garden suburb, built in São Paulo in 1917)³².

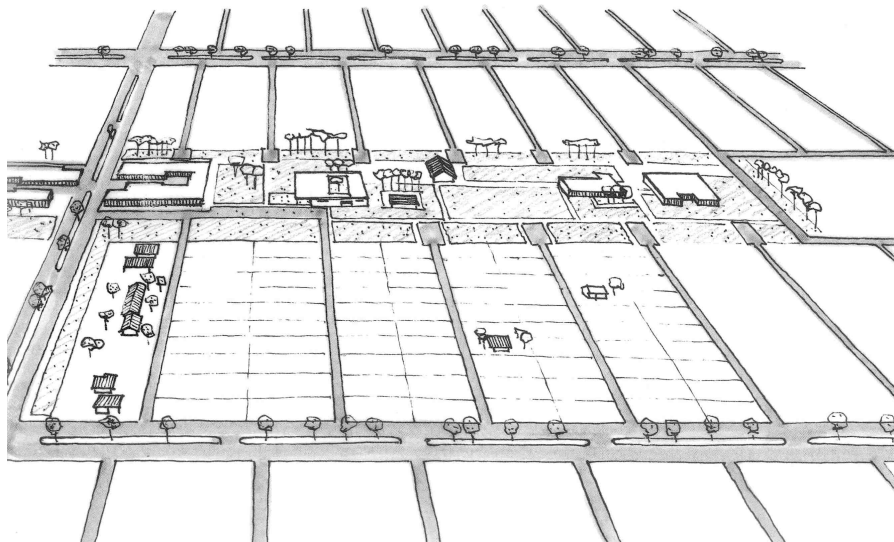


Figure 2: Wilhelm, Jorge. *Perspective of Angélica's neighbourhood unit, 1954*. [Wilhelm: 2003]

Distinct from Goiânia's and Radburn's picturesqueness, Angélica's neighbourhood unit (Figure 2) depicts a Cartesian, regular, symmetrical, uniform, standardised layout. Its designer, young architect Jorge Wilhelm, was interested in Le Corbusier's ideas and in the CIAMs' planning discourse, while not disregarding the 'English town planning and their garden cities'³³. A small new town in a pioneering rural area, Angélica was thus organised into functional sectors and its residential neighbourhood was organised into rectangular units whose central area was longitudinally defined by a green area with various community facilities. The estimated town population was 15,000 inhabitants and each neighbourhood unit, measuring 370 x 670 meters, should house around 1,600 people (with a density of roughly 65 inhabitants per hectare). Local commerce was located on one edge of these green areas and a series of plots for single-family detached houses were arranged into orthogonal cul-de-sacs. The location of common buildings on the green area follows the modernist inversion in the town-



layout, from continuous solid to continuous void³⁴; consequently, the vitality of the multi-use street was lost, along with the interaction of pedestrians and vehicles. However, the cul-de-sacs were eventually opened-up, the continuous green area was crossed by connecting streets and commercial buildings popped-up among the houses.

Unlike Angélica, Brasília's 'neighbourhood areas' (as Lucio Costa translated and referred to his neighbourhood units) suppressed the private ownership of urban land, elevated six-story, multifamily, uniform residential buildings, and increased urban density, thus combining the Anglo-Saxon concept of neighbourhood unit with the Corbusieran pilotis and endorsing the idea of a park-city. Costa designed four squared superblocks (280 meters the length of each side) to form each neighbourhood unit, whose population should range from 10,000 to 12,000 inhabitants. The estimated density of the superblock was little more than 300 inhabitants per hectare. Thus the original idea of a walkable distance between residences and common facilities and the segregation of commerce and motor vehicles were kept. The uncommon, egalitarian, functional city was to be the image of modern Brazil. By dis-familiarising and re-conceptualising city life, the radically new urban form was to connect architectural innovation, change in individual perception and social transformation³⁵. The layout of Brasília's neighbourhood units has been preserved through mandatory heritage protection³⁶, though not without suffering a significant change: commercial buildings settled on the edge of each superblock originally faced the interior of the neighbourhood unit, with their backs to service streets, but soon this position was inverted in order to recuperate the more traditional display of corridor-streets, and some *pilotis* were closed by walls and glass panels, blocking the spatial continuity³⁷. Brasília was at the same time a city of hope and a modernist dystopia³⁸.



Figure 3: Camargo, José Geraldo da Cunha. *Plan of Rurópolis (detail of neighbourhood unit), 1972.* [Camargo: 1973]

Rurópolis' neighbourhood unit (Figure 3) returns to a less regular layout (due to adaption to site conditions) and the private ownership of residential plots for single-family detached houses, which were arranged along parallel cul-de-sacs, perpendicularly linked to vast green areas. The estimated town population was roughly 5,000 inhabitants and its neighbourhood units considered 1,000 inhabitants to each elementary school (population density around 42 inhabitants per hectare). Commerce, services and the main public buildings were to be located on a long, continuous green area in the city centre. Architect and town planner José Geraldo da Cunha Camargo, closely related to then president Médici, believed that the town's rationalist layout would bring together its carefully selected citizens, who were to be prepared for its community life and consequential benefits. The cautious selection of citizens was intended to prevent the social segregation caused by religion, customs,



previous relationships or origin. It was hoped that all inequalities would be eliminated in the Transamazonian scheme and so new towns with uniform, indistinct, standardised houses (in the neighbourhood units) were therefore expected to create a new, unbiased urban environment³⁹. Located in the middle of the Amazonian forest, the new-town layout endorsed the bucolic image and a low urban density – a slightly different image of what progress was expected to be compared to what generally appealed in that milieu. However, like in Angélica, Rurópolis' cul-de-sacs soon disappeared with the dead-end streets being extended and their portions of the original green areas being parcelled off. The neighbourhood units simply vanished from Rurópolis layout⁴⁰ (Figure 4).



Figure 4: *Aerial view of Rurópolis*. [Google Earth: 2017]

Brasília was created in a democratic period but really thrived during the military regime, being easily related to the contemporary authoritarianism. Thus the layout of Palmas has a dual relationship with Brasília's urbanism: continuity and break. Palmas' macro-block (not superblock like in Brasília) varies its typology (by being less authoritarian and more flexible in its internal arrangement) as it follows, to a certain extent, the international criticism of functionalist planning and contextualises the recent democratisation of the country. Even so it does not totally abandon modernist ideas and certain precepts of the Charter of Athens⁴¹. Varied experiences contributed to the 'late modernism' of Palmas, including Milton Keynes New Town, then visited by the architects and town planners Luiz Fernando Cruvinel Teixeira and Walfredo Antunes de Oliveira Filho, who had lived in Goiânia, gone to college in Brasília and attended postgraduate courses in London.

In Palmas, large roads articulated by roundabouts define an orthogonal grid from which stems secondary roads that lead to residential macro-blocks, equivalent to the neighbourhood unit scheme. Macro-blocks' dimensions are 600 by 700 meters for a population raging from 8,000 to 12,000 inhabitants (roughly 285 inhabitants per hectare). Within the macro-blocks, informal, secondary streets give access to individual plots, common areas and public facilities⁴². Traditional morphological elements, e.g. streets, street corners, blocks, plots and detached houses were to be applied. Each macro-block was to be laid out differently to the others, with unique internal configurations to be designed by different architects⁴³, thereby avoiding Brasília's monotony and uniformity, though creating a resulting heterogeneous and confusing collection of neighbourhoods. Various residential-building types were to be included in it, from detached single-family residences to grouped houses to multi-story apartment buildings. Urban density was universally fixed and the existence of local commerce, schools, community centres, churches, health centres, and nurseries was envisaged⁴⁴. Due to minor urban flux, however, the internal public areas became less safe and little used. Supposedly, pedestrians would not need walk outside



the macro-blocks and cross the large main roads, as daily, ordinary necessities were to be supplied within them. Small daily commerce was to be found in the entrance of the macro-block while vicinal commercial buildings were to be located on the edge of each macro-block, facing the roads, endorsing the neighbourhood's autonomy and insulation. But it has not, in fact, functioned that way: commercial and residential buildings have been mixed in the core of the most popular macro-blocks, thus departing from the original plan.

Conclusion

The Brazilian new towns' neighbourhood units were a technical response to the quest for a modern, and supposedly better, urban way of living. They replaced a traditional spatial form of organisation for another, radically innovative one, and were supposed to shape the constitution of a new social order. They were adopted in different historical contexts to represent the modernisation of the country and its international alignment, and to reflect it physically on the urban environment at the domestic level.

The Brazilian neighbourhood unit also aimed at fostering community life. Neighbourhood units built in Goiânia (1936), Angélica (1954), Brasília (1957) and Rurópolis (1972) were scaled around the needs of children for an elementary school, echoing Perry's idea developed in the United States, while in Palmas (1989) they responded to CIAMs-influenced forms of neighbourhood organization. Brasília's neighbourhood units depicted Corbusieran residential slabs, and Palmas foresaw vertical residential buildings. Angélica, Rurópolis and Goiânia's neighbourhood units were structured upon detached single-family houses in private plots. Only Brasília's neighbourhood units remain (virtually) in their original aspects, certainly due to their mandatory heritage protection.

Brazilian neighbourhood units have depicted ever-contrasting layouts, distinct from established patterns of city living and oblivious to local preferences, and ended up being considerably transformed, many of them rejected and erased from town layouts. People's lives were ultimately not influenced by their physical environments, which, in turn, ended up being substantially transformed. Without passive compliance, residents, developers and public municipal administrations all participated in the transformations that mainly occurred in the neighbourhoods' structures (like in Angélica, Rurópolis and Palmas) but can also be noticed at the housing-level (like in Goiânia). These transformations – including a complete erasure of the neighbourhood unit – adapted the planned urban environment to the citizens' practical needs and cultural preferences.

The foreign neighbourhood unit embodied not only an unfamiliar urban arrangement but also new social and cultural values. Historians have shown that such a relationship between urban layout and resident may stem from acts of will, but its acceptance depends on its capacity of adherence, of establishing connections either with the pre-existing imagery or the collective aspirations for a new imagery.

These innovative urban forms, which endorsed the simplification of urban complexity, segregation of urban functions and social transformation through the reforming ambitions of modernist planning, were not accepted as a new urban condition. The populations who came to inhabit these new towns were not compliant and did not subject themselves to their neighbourhood-units' configurations and, therefore, transformed them into more traditional urban forms because of their physical inadequacies and cultural incompatibilities. This paper has thus exposed contradictions and conflicts between the planners' visions and the cities' appropriation by their inhabitants, whose knowledge might help us to grow more contextual planning histories.

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Notes on contributor(s)

Prof. Rego is a full professor at the *Universidade Estadual de Maringá* (UEM), Brazil. His teaching has focused on modern architecture and town planning history, and his research interests concern the influence of foreign



ideas on twentieth-century Brazil. His current research project is related to the construction of new towns along the Transamazonian Highway in the early 1970s. He has been an Associate Research Fellow at the Centre for Iberian and Latin American Visual Studies (CILAVS), Birkbeck College, London, and Visiting Professor at the Center for Latin American Studies, University of Florida, USA.

Endnotes

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⁶ See Tota, *O Imperialismo Sedutor*.

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- ²⁹ Renato Leão Rego, “Brazilian Garden Cities and Suburbs: Accommodating Urban Modernity and Foreign Ideals,” *Journal of Planning History* 13 (2014): 287; Lima, “Goiânia, A Nova Capital,” 141.
- ³⁰ Rego, “Brazilian Garden Cities,” 286; See Celina Manso, *Goiânia* (Goiânia: Author’s edition, 2001); Maria Cristina da Silva Leme, *Urbanismo no Brasil 1895-1965* (Salvador: UFBA, 1995); Armando A. de Godoy, “A Cidade-Jardim (1931),” in *A Urbs e os Seus Problemas*, Armando A. de Godoy, 135-140 (Rio de Janeiro: Jornal do Comércio, 1943).
- ³¹ See Rego, “Brazilian Garden Cities,” 288.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 286, see also Rego, “Unidade de Vizinhança.”
- ³³ Jorge Wilhelm, *A Obra Pública de Jorge Wilhelm* (São Paulo: Dorea Books, 2003): 33.
- ³⁴ Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1995): 56; Milton Braga, *O Concurso de Brasília* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2010): 202.
- ³⁵ Holston, *A Cidade Modernista*, 62-63.
- ³⁶ See José Pessoa, “O Tombamento de Centro Histórico Moderno,” in *Brasília - Antologia Crítica*, org. A. Xavier and J. Katinsky, 298-305 (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2012).
- ³⁷ Rego, “Unidade de Vizinhança,” 407.
- ³⁸ Florian Urban, *Tower and Slab. Histories of Global Mass Housing* (London: Routledge, 2012): 88-89.
- ³⁹ See José Geraldo da Cunha Camargo, *Urbanismo Rural* (Brasília: Ministério da Agricultura/INCRA, 1973).
- ⁴⁰ Rego, “Unidade de Vizinhança,” 410.
- ⁴¹ See Velasques, “A Concepção de Palmas”; Trindade, “Challenges for New Town Design,” 69.
- ⁴² GrupoQuatro, “A Concepção da Nova Capital,” *Revista Projeto* 146 (1991): 97.
- ⁴³ “O Ideal e o Real.” *Revista Projeto* 146 (1991): 106.
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Figure 4: Google Earth, 2017.