

Brasilia: emptiness as monument

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Several years ago it was through Emmanuel Pinard's photographs that I made my first trip to Brasilia; my second came a few weeks ago when I actually went there. Because of the images, I experienced a strange feeling of familiarity after my thirteen hour flight, just as, arriving in New York for the first time, cinema and music's powerful inscription within international popular culture means that we immediately recognize the place right from our first steps through JFK airport.

Generally speaking we are familiar only with the traditional images of Brasilia, the white shapes of this desolate Star Trek setting. Niemeyer began to experiment with his second style there. From the end of the 1950s, he ceased to serve up modernist tropical architecture, as he had done so masterfully at the Ibirapuera Park or the Copan building in São Paulo, in favour of a formal signature, so singular that it is closer to design than to architecture, to decor than to construction.

Looking at Brasilia, Emmanuel Pinard did not fall for the fetishistic fascination that these buildings usually provoke among architects and architectural photographers. And, instead of photographing the structures, he has concentrated on Brasilia's main, yet rarely mentioned monument: the empty land, which featured right from the initial plan. Instead of the white abstract forms like cut-out paper birds against the blue sky, he preferred the red earth of the Matos, an arid plateau at an altitude of 1000 metres which acts both as a base for and the main character of Brasilia. The ground and empty space are present everywhere signifying both the dominance of the geographic location on the city, and the impossibility of the city to obliterate it. The presence of the emptiness also expresses the fundamental dimension of the modern city, which hasn't ceased from pushing elements apart as much as possible – keeping buildings away from each other, separating the traffic flows, disassociating buildings from roads, etc. Finally, the presence of the ground in the immense spread of this territory signifies the scale of the continental land of which it is the capital. And, from its presence in the city, this ground is affected by a minimal but essential transformation. It becomes the support for all traces of the usage of the site as the linear paths made by poor pedestrians demonstrate, like short cuts in the utopian intentions of the planners.

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