

Touring Club Headquarters in Brasilia

A Case Study of a Deteriorated Modern Monument

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Abstract

The Touring Club Building is part of the architectural setting that is creating the eastern part of the Brasilia's Monumental Axis in the Lucio Costa's urban plan. Designed by Oscar Niemeyer in the 1960's, it is a modern building, built as reinforced concrete structure, which supports a pavilion on stilts. The building originally designed as a Touring Club in 1960's. After the Touring Club was closed in 1990's the building left abandoned. After that, it entered into a rapid deterioration process. This study addresses the conservation of the building based on the cultural values observed.

Introduction

This paper refers to a modern and yet deteriorated building, designed by Oscar Niemeyer in Brasilia. Located at the city's central area, the Touring Club's original function was to be part of an entertainment and cultural centre. In the city's original plan, urbanist Lucio Costa proposed a building for a bar, café and restaurant, on the opposite side of the National Theatre.

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Figure 1: Touring Club Building

Despite the building's importance, it has never met its original purpose. From the 1960's to the 1990's, it actually served as the local headquarters of Brazil's Touring Club. After that, it was abandoned and, most recently (2007), it was temporarily re-designed for an interior design exhibition.

Given its particular condition, the urban setting of the eastern part of the Brasilia's Monumental Axis is analyzed. The comprehension of

its significance in relation to the site in question is based on *Report of the Pilot Plan for Brasilia*, with which Lucio Costa participated on the national competition for the New Capital of Brazil in 1957. While studying the building itself two projects were used for comparative analysis:

- Original project by Niemeyer from 1963
- The intervention project from 1985

Background

The Site

Founded in April 21, 1960, Brasilia was created from Lucio Costa's urban project, winner of the *Pilot Plan Competition for the New Capital of Brazil* in 1957.

Being aware of the fact that Brasilia should be a capital city, Costa has designed it as a monumental modern city of its time.

Based on the intersection of two axes, the urbanist defined one of them as the main axis, the symmetry axis, the Monumental Axis, dividing the Highway Axis in two parts (north and south). Thus, he developed the principle that determined the various spatial sectors connecting it to the four scales of Brasilia:

- The monumental scale, which characterizes the capital city in the main axis
- The gregarious scale, where the urban living and the leisure take place at the intersection of the axes
- The residential scale, the place of residence along the Highway Axis
- The bucolic scale, which characterizes the park-city.

In the eastern part of the main axis, taking in consideration the monumental outline that he wished to develop, Costa levelled the terrain in terraces. He determined the very precise position of the buildings, developing rhythm with focal points in a strict formal composition:

- The foreground shows the civic square, the Plaza of Three Powers, where he proposed the palaces designed for the fundamental powers of the republic, the Government House, the Congress and the Supreme Court, arranged in the shape of an equilateral triangle
- In the background, the administrative centre, marked by the clear sequence of laminar buildings designed for ministries and autarchies, where different buildings are for the Ministries of Justice and Foreign Affairs and the other centres for the Cathedral and Military Ministries. Finalizing this background, the cultural district is followed by the bus station platform, on the intersection of the axes

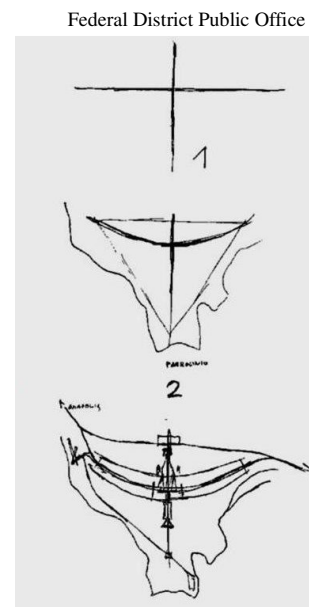


Figure 2: Lucio Costa's sketches

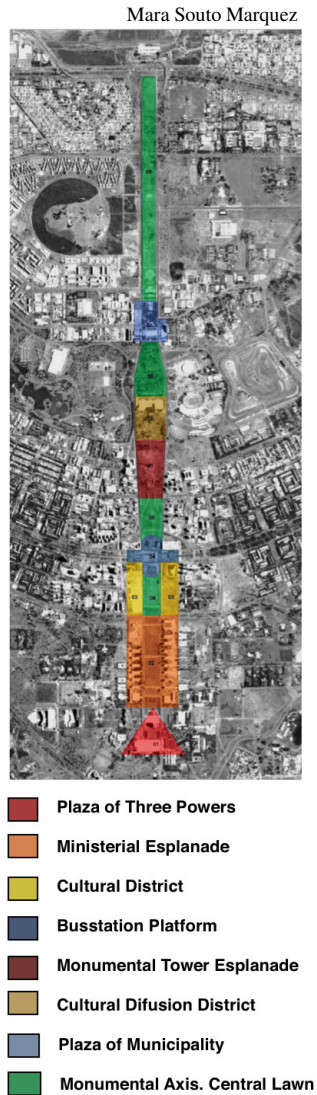


Figure 3: Monumental Axis

- Above the ministerial esplanade, the bus station platform was the solution applied to fill the intersection of the axes at different levels, and where he also added the entertainment sector of the city. At the western side of the platform, two major centres were designed at the northern and southern parts and they were planned for commercial usage. These two major centres were connected with an open structure that was allowing the visual continuity of the Monumental Axis. In eastern side of the platform, the area facing the cultural district, a large square was designed for the contemplation of the esplanade's view, articulating through the 'Opera' and 'a possible tea house' (Costa 1991:24)
- As a part of the complex, the upper plan in relation to the bus station platform had the monumental tower for radio and television broadcast stations

The first amendment to the original plan by Lucio Costa meant the displacement of the entire city towards the east, taking into account the observation made by William Holford (1957:13), English architect and urbanist, member of the jury in the competition for the New Capital, referring to the existence of 'too much indeterminate land between the government centre and lake.'

As a result of this dislocation, the intersection between axes had changed. The central sectors changed its position in regards to the new topographical conditions.

Another change in design, which also directly affected this platform, refers to the solution adopted by Oscar Niemeyer for the National Congress. As observed by Sylvia Ficher and Geraldo Batista (2000:86), 'the dimensions of the elegant platform with the plenary of the house of representatives and senate extended the vast central lawn, led the construction of the two axes traffic lanes, which resulted in considerable extension of the esplanade.'

Thus, the dimensions of the platform, designed to cover the bus station, was changed. Due to the cost of construction, the structure was transformed into an 'H' shape.

According to such changes, the building that would link the two major centres of the entertainment centre in the western side of the platform was eliminated. The eastern side had remained free of buildings, linked to the cultural district, at the north, through the 'Opera', the National Theatre, and at the south side, through the Touring Club, the 'possible tea house', proposed by Costa.

The Building

Although the character of ‘a low pavilion facing the gardens of the cultural district’ had been maintained, as suggested by Costa (1991:24), the building had its function modified since the very beginning. Under the justification for providing with a centre for cultural and tourism services, the building was designed by Oscar Niemeyer (1962:32) to be the Brazil’s Touring Club headquarters.

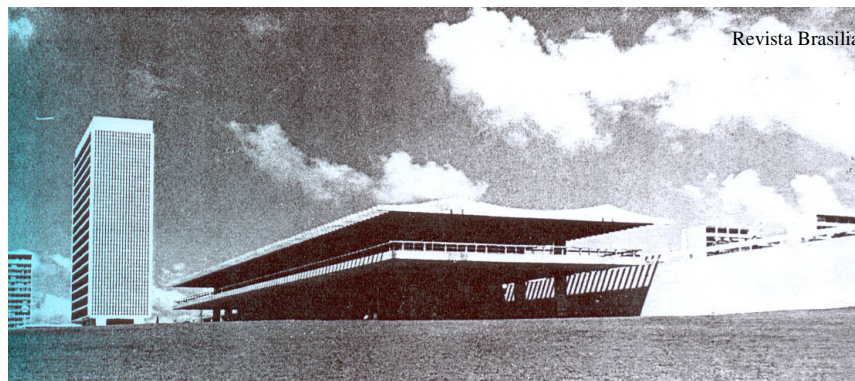


Figure 4: Touring Club Building

According to the original project, the pavilion was suspended on the South Cultural Sector, at the level of the bus station platform. The pavilion is light, closed with glass that allows the view over the ministerial esplanade. The building was constructed in reinforced concrete, where the pavilion supported by pillars, forming a stilt at the esplanade level and roof supported with outer framework. According to Ficher and Batista (2000:124), ‘its most characteristic architectural element is the design of the roof, which suggests the curve of the bending moment of its beams.’

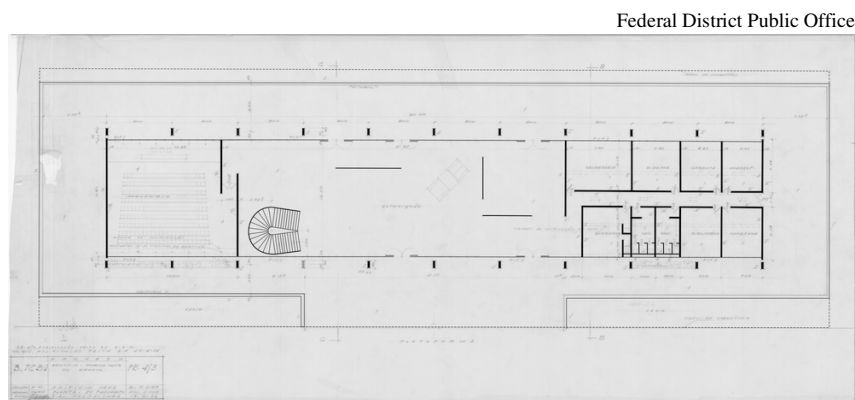


Figure 5: Upper floor plan from 1960's

Composed of two floors and a mezzanine, the building is 6000 m² of built area. The ground floor, at the ministerial esplanade level, was originally designed to have car services and gas station in open space and was planned to be integrated with the South Cultural Sector, and a passage for pedestrians, leading towards the bus station platform. In

the mezzanine, dorm rooms, meal room and toilets for staff were constructed for the 24-h operation of the services. In the upper floor, at the bus station platform level, the hall for exhibitions were designed and the wings were occupied with the administration and general services, as well as an auditorium (Niemeyer 1962:34).

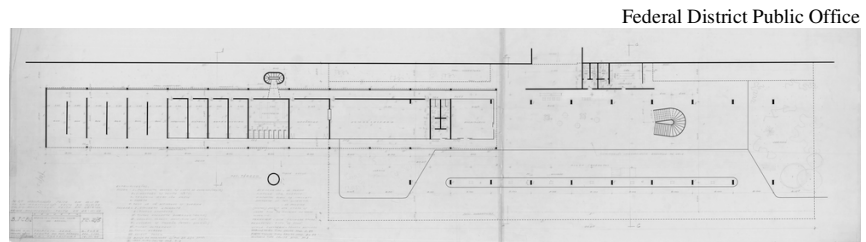


Figure 6: Ground floor plan from 1960's

Finished in the late 1960's, the building suffered the first intervention in the 1980's, according to Niemeyer's project. The major changes relate to the upper floor (bus station platform level), where the vast area originally intended for exhibition was subdivided with the aim of creating spaces for services. The same happened with the auditorium, where two toilets, rooms for administration, client service and sales were added.

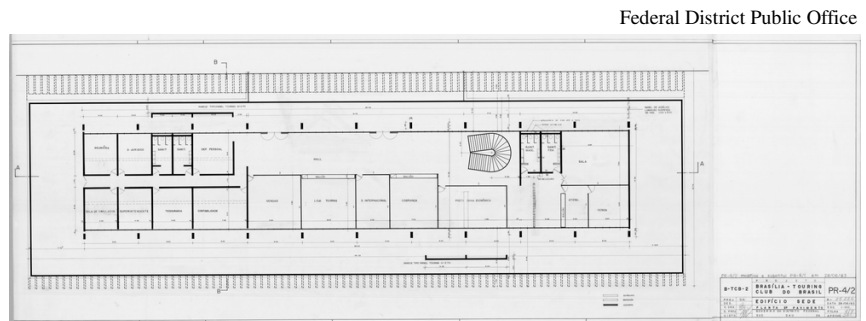


Figure 7: Upper floor plan from 1980's

At the end of the 1990's, the Touring Club was closed and the building was abandoned, where the accelerated decline process started. According to Andrey Schlee et al (2007:3), it was 'so intense that Niemeyer suggested its demolition', in view of its poor conservation condition. In 2007, the building underwent a second intervention for the performance of an interior design exhibition (Casa Cor 2007). In this intervention, the concrete structure was painted, without previous treatment for the various pathologies presented; the design of the upper floor and ground floor were modified; and the glass façades were covered with exterior panels, undermining the pavilion transparency.

Currently, the study for the third intervention is underway, where it's planned for Regional Administration of Brasilia to be housed on the upper floor. The panels that covered the external façade were removed, a metal grille protecting main entrance was installed, and the

concrete structure received a new layer of paint. There is different analysis currently ongoing where the space is proposed for different administration proposes.



Figure 8: The building after 2007's intervention and the current situation

Analysis

Significance

Brasilia was designed as a monument, with the objective to create the new country's capital city. According to this objective, Lucio Costa defined the regulating principles of the city: the intersection of two axes, one being monumental axis, carrying monumental scale, which 'is depicting the new born city the unavoidable mark of effective capital of the country' (Costa 1987:8).

The Touring Club building is part of the architectural settings that compose the eastern part of the Monumental Axis, making the link between the bus station platform and the South Cultural Sector, recently concluded with the completion of the Republic Museum and the National Library of Brasilia in 2006. Thus, the building is in a unique position in this set up, making gregarious scale overlaps with monumental scale. Therefore, considering its individual characteristics and architectural set up, the following primary values could be observed in the building:

- Historic value, due to the building originating from the initial phase of the founding of Brasilia, designed by Oscar Niemeyer, which is part of the architectural setting of the eastern part of the Monumental Axis
- Use value, due to its original function (restaurant, bar and tea house) by Costa in *Report of the Pilot Plan for Brasilia* (1991:24)
- Architectural value, for being a representative building of the Brazilian modern architecture, which reached its peak with the construction of Brasilia
- Scenic value, due to the organisation of the space and materials (such as glass for a façade) where the panoramic view over ministerial esplanade is outstanding

Considering the primary values described and the building's position, creating the connection between the bus station platform with the

South Cultural Sector, the following secondary values could be observed:

- Recreational value, for its proximity to the entertainment district and the South Cultural Sector and considering its original function (restaurant, bar and tea house)
- Economic value, considering the fact that building has regained its public usage strengthen the generation of the income, and the revitalisation in terms of more visitors circulating through space
- Symbolic value, as part of the symbolic value of the Monumental Axis(Worthing and Bond: 2008: 62-69)

Vulnerability

As part of the vulnerability assessment of the building under study, aspects such as the legal protection system of Brasilia and the building itself should be considered.

The introduction of a legal protection system aiming to preserve the Pilot Plan is contemporary to the foundation of the city. In 1960, the Santiago Dantas Act ruled that any amendment to the Pilot Plan should be preceded by approval from the Federal Senate. In 1967, the Building Code was published, regulating the building construction activity in Brasilia.

In 1987, the Decree 10.829 was edited, which protects Brasilia in the district jurisdiction, in response to the requirement of UNESCO for the inscription of the city on the List of World Heritage. Then, the city gets new legal protection in the federal sphere, when the urban setting of Lucio Costa's Pilot Plan is inscribed on the list of national heritage, through Ordinance No 04/1990, replaced by Decree 314/1992.

Both the Decree 314/1992 as the Ordinance 10.829/1987 protect the four scales that compose the Pilot Plan, determined by Costa in the *1985-87 Brasilia Revisitada* document: the monumental, residential, gregarious and bucolic scales.

The protection of isolated monuments is done through specific decrees and the Touring Club building is in process of inclusion on the list of national heritage, as it still does not have specific legal protection in the district jurisdiction.

Another issue related to the vulnerability of the building refers to its ownership. The building was proposed by Costa to be for public use, to have a restaurant, bar and tea house. By becoming private property, a conflict of interest was created with respect to the usage of the building.

Proposal

For the preservation of the Brasilia Touring Club building, according to a significance assessment, it is crucial to resolve two issues concerning its vulnerability: its usage and ownership.

Considering the conflict of interest with respect to the usage of the building, the following is recommended:

- For a building to be converted into public administration building
- For a building to have its own administration unit
- For a building to house income generating activities, initiated by private entrepreneurs

Considering the redefinition of the building use, in agreement to the usage suggested by Costa, and considering the original project from the 1960's, the following program is recommended:

- Customer service centre for tourists, administration, exhibitions and events, with multimedia room on the first floor
- Restaurant in the mezzanine
- Shops, cafes and bars distributed in boxes that were originally designed for technical assistance for cars in the ground floor

Considering the architectural significance and image of the building, contemporary to the first phase of Brasilia and designed by Oscar Niemeyer, author of the most monuments built in the eastern part of the Monumental Axis, the following is recommended:

- Recovery of the concrete structure as in the original project
- Recovery of the building transparency through the recovery of the light glass façade in the upper floor
- Restoration of the passage that links the ministerial esplanade in the lower level with and the bus station platform on the higher one

Method

After the survey of the current conditions of the building, including the original features remaining and interventions, the restoration plan should be carried out based on the existing original project from 1960's and the new program suggested:

- Removal of the painting and treatment of reinforced concrete structure
- Removal of the grid protecting the main entrance on the upper floor
- Rehabilitation of the central hall for exhibitions and events in the upper floor
- Design of the multimedia room, customer service centre for tourists and administration in the upper floor
- Design of the restaurant in the mezzanine

- Design of the commercial centre (shops, cafes and bars), distributed in the boxes originally intended for technical assistance for cars, in the ground floor
- Restoration of the passage that links the ground floor and the bus station platform

Assumed Results

Although the building had originally been designed to be the local headquarters of the Touring Club, the restoration of the use suggested in the *Report of the Pilot Plan for Brasilia* would strengthen the values related to its significance:

- The recovery of the building's historic ties with the design of Brasilia, considering its construction, shape and use suggested by Costa in the *Report of the Pilot Plan*, with reference to the original project of Niemeyer and its architectural significance
- The architectural restoration, according to the original project of Niemeyer, rescues the scenic value through the restoration of the building transparency, and the symbolic value, as part of the overall architecture from the eastern side of the Monumental Axis
- The rescue of the building's original destination, as suggested by Costa in the *Report of the Pilot Plan*, strengthens its role in the entertainment district and the South Cultural Sector
- The use of the building as a restaurant, bar and tea house creates incentives for economic benefits and revitalisation of the area, known of problems related to urban violence

Conclusion

The Touring Club building is part of the monumental setting of Brasilia, defined by Costa in the *Report of the Pilot Plan*. In addition to its intrinsic significance, the building's value is strengthened by the spatial set up. Thus, for the preservation of the building and its cultural values, it is essential to consider not only the architectural definitions of Niemeyer, but also the intentions determined by Costa, what justifies the rescue of its use as bar, café and restaurant, 'a possible tea house'.

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