Frederico de Holanda (2011), *Exceptional space*

Published by: FRBH

Reviewed by:
Luiz Amorim
Associate Professor
Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Recife, Brazil

Pages: 228-229

The Journal of Space Syntax
ISSN: 2044-7507 | Year: 2012 | volume: 3 | issue: 2 | Online Publication Date: 28 December 2012

http://www.journalofspacesyntax.org/
Book Review:
Frederico de Holanda (2011), Exceptional space

Published by: FRBH

Reviewed by
Luiz Amorim
Associate Professor
Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, Recife, Brazil

Exceptional space was originally published in 2002 by Editora Universidade de Brasília [University of Brasilia Press] as a Portuguese version of Frederico de Holanda’s PhD thesis which he submitted to the Bartlett School of Graduate Studies in 1997. Widely regarded by Brazilian scholars and Portuguese speakers, the thesis received the Brazilian Award for best thesis in Policy and Urban and Regional Planning in 1998 from the National Association for Research and Graduate Studies in Urban and Regional Planning. The English language version of Holanda’s text has now finally reached a wider audience with its publication as an e-book by FRBH.

The core of the book is dedicated to the study of settlements, which the author calls exceptional spaces. These are characterised by separating categories of individuals into isolated areas within the urban fabric, which have a strong symbolical and ceremonial character. They are related to socio-spatial structures by sharply separating individuals and groups according to gender, social status, professional specialisation and economic class. Exceptional spaces are observed throughout history, and found in distinct political contexts, productive systems, urban forms and geographical environments.

The book is structured in three parts. ‘Society as artefact’ introduces the theoretical framework and the principles of the paradigms of formality and of urbanity as proposed by the author, while ‘Exceptional space in perspective’ and ‘Brasília’ delve into historical and contemporary settlements in accordance with the three analytic categories that Holanda elects to use: spatial patterns, spatial life and social life. The last chapter summarises and reinforces the arguments that support the concept of exceptional space.

The author’s three levels of analytical framework comprise: a) spatial pattern, which describes the configurational properties related to the generation of interpersonal encounters in public spaces; b) spatial life, which refers to aspects of co-presence and co-awareness; and c) social life, which is understood as a set of cultural patterns, seen as variables that are independent of spatial patterns and social life, and is described by income levels, categories of division of labour, access to decision-making processes and to material production, and so on.

The attributes observed in each analytical category characterise the settlements in accordance with a theoretical model built by an interval between two polar tendencies: the paradigms of formality and urbanity. The first comprises settlements in which the social structures are strongly stratified, hierarchical and ceremonial, as in authoritarian regimes, and in these cases physical separation is evident. The second is related to more democratic systems and spatial arrangements that to a greater extent integrate different categories of users, and particularly those of the public and private spheres.

The concepts of urbanity and formality are presented as an alternative to the classification proposed by Hillier of a city that is instrumental and symbolic. Hillier’s two notions of classification apply respectively to the production of everyday life, with intense and varied co-presence, and to those related to the reproduction of social structures. For Holanda, the instrumental-symbolic dichotomy may
suggest the absence of instrumental or symbolic attributes in either type. The paradigms and analytical procedure proposed by the author seek to overcome the limits observed. It is by means of the measure of urbanity (URB) that the distinct intra-urban constitutions are described.

In order to scrutinise this, the settlements and social structures of the Mayas and Hopi, in America; the Zulus and the Ashantis, in Africa; and feudal castles and the city-states of Italy, in Europe, are compared. So too are Brasília and the 16 settlements that make up the Federal District, the territorial unit which is the seat of the Brazilian government.

Brasília, an object of the author’s ongoing interest, receives particular attention. Holanda seeks to show that the exceptional aspect of the Brazilian capital is not, as some authors seek to emphasise, due to the political context of the transfer of power from Rio de Janeiro, the former capital, or of the malign influences for which some say modern town planning is responsible. But, rather, this reveals evidence of attributes common to the different settlements studied, which characterises them as, let us say, universal properties of the spaces of exception.