Frederico de Holanda's
Brasília: modern city, eternal city

Reviewed By

João Pinelo
Bartlett School of Graduate Studies
London, UK

Pages: 249-250
This book is a rare work about a rare city. If the rareness of the city is well known for its planned genesis and monumental architectural landmarks, the work itself is atypical for its focus on the understanding of the role of the built environment in the life of the city. As Holanda frames it, his text is an interpretation of Brasilia; of how the architecture affects the life of its citizens and visitors. The work follows the rationale of examining the city as architecture, and as an object of many discourses: of its architect Lúcio Costa, of architects and critics, and of the population in general. This is achieved by continuous reference to three stages of development: the design process, the city of today, and the city of the future.

Holanda establishes a wide vision of architecture that, as he assumes, challenges established views of urban theorists like Lúcio Costa himself, Bill Hillier, and Evaldo Coutinho, in which he merges the natural and built environments, irrespective of their roots. It is the role of this architecture of the city as a whole, which he investigates through questions like: how does the city support the functions it contains? How does it encourage life? Does it promote interaction between different social classes, ethnic groups and generations? As he asserts, these issues are the basis of urbanity.

In this endeavour, Holanda identifies configurational origins for one of the serious problems the city has, namely social segregation. The study of configuration allied to geographical, demographic and economic descriptions allowed for a diagnosis of spatial and functional fragmentation, eccentricity and dispersion that Holanda identifies as paramount issues to be dealt with in the future. He identifies Brasilia as a poly-nuclei city, and elaborates on the consequences of this spatial articulation for the daily life of the population. Moreover, armed with an understanding of the implications of the built environment for city life, he criticises some new tendencies that, as he demonstrates, accentuate rather than repair, social segregation.
With an inspiring attitude, Holanda does not stop at reaching a diagnosis. In concluding, the author describes his own vision of what Brasília could become. He does so by presenting us with a vivid description of the city of the future that explicitly contains numerous proposals for concrete interventions that he devises to address the issues identified in the analysis; this way concluding an enlightening lesson in architecture.

At a more general level, this work succeeds in clarifying the deep relationship of interdependence between master-planning and architecture, by providing abundant evidence that the two disciplines are unequivocally linked by the social logic of space.

- 11/06/2010