

Although Lucia Costa envisaged a complete and finite city of uniform appearance and social construction in his Pilot Plan for Brasília, events and human nature intervened to ensure otherwise. When the city was inaugurated in 1961 very little was actually finished, despite the heroic achievement of the first 3 years work. In 1964, when a military coup ended a long succession of technocratic and progressive governments, while most of the government buildings were complete only 10 of the projected 92 main *superquadras* had a significant amount of construction, all except one in the *asa sul* [south wing]. Of these, only 6, known in Brasília as the *superquadras originais* [original *superquadras*], contained the original public facilities and landscaping designed by Oscar Niemeyer and Roberto Burle Marx.

After 1964, buildings increasingly diverged from the spirit and letter of the Pilot Plan. The Pilot Plan began to fill with less heroic buildings, and public facilities and landscaping began to be regarded as frivolous extras. After the return to democracy in 1985 Brazil adopted the prevailing neo-liberal political and economic values, overthrowing the Euro-centric Modernism of the 1930s which had provided the impetus for the Pilot Plan



Asa Sul in 1964, showing the *superquadras originais*  
Photo © Arquivo Público do Distrito Federal

for North American consumerism. The current populist development of the city is, in contradiction to the declarations of its advocates, more anonymous and hostile than the dignified apartment blocks and strong public realm of the Pilot Plan. The accelerating 'post-modernisation' of even the original apartment blocks - the application of 'Colonial' decorative features - is destroying the integrity of architecture and landscape. Even the few *superquadras originais* have come under threat from real estate speculation.

I first visited Brasília when there was a determination to address the failings of the incomplete original city and it was not yet clear that populism would overwhelm it. What struck me most was the extraordinary amount of left-over space that had been created as consequence of the design of the city. Some spaces could hardly be avoided - such as the huge landscape spaces within the city itself, which resisted the urbanity of the city. Others needed to be sniffed out, such as roofs of apartment blocks in the *superquadras originais*, which were a by-product of the reductivism of Modernism. The roofs formed uniform platforms six storeys above ground level, usually articulated in each block by three two-storey lift towers.

# REVISITING BRAZIL

## *Superquadra* penthouses, Brasília

### Thomas Deckker Architect 1999



Sand fence, Blakeney Point  
Photo © Thomas Deckker

To make the roofs inhabitable required only one small addition of architecture to this analogous landscape: a wall placed against each lift tower to define 'front' and 'back', or 'social' and 'service' sides. The single wall in each apartment was intended to be made of the beautiful *sucupira* wood similar to the walls in Niemeyer's palaces which play such an important part in the extension of interior space out into the landscape. The only other elements required would be a continuous curtain of light-weight glazing for the external walls and a free-form concrete roof. The sun shines directly overhead, and thus the roofs would cast long shadows down the blocks out of all proportion to their visibility from the ground.

This project had a political dimension, too. My intention was to add a layer of difference to relieve the social uniformity of the *superquadras* brought about by the uniformity of types of inhabitation. Making an inhabitable layer on the top - necessarily for the more sophisticated - was a discerning reflection, I thought, of the occupation of the ground floor by the - unfortunately poor - porters. Just as the domestic space of the apartments is necessarily serviced by maids, the urban space of the blocks is necessarily surveyed and controlled by porters. These apartments would give their inhabitants the impression of living in a true urban landscape.



Roof terrace, *superquadras originais*  
Photo © Thomas Deckker

This roof landscape seemed not only to be architecturally incomplete, but analogous to another very distant and supposedly natural landscape in England - that of Blakeney Point on the north Norfolk coast. The shifting sand dunes there are propagated and stabilised by rows of wooden stake fences; in other words, the landscape is formed by the architecture. The sand-fences formed spaces among themselves and between themselves and the landscape, a possibility of architecture I thought appropriate to investigate on the roofs of the *superquadras*.



*Superquadra* penthouse project  
Thomas Deckker Architect