

Rosane Bauer:

### Living with Brasilia

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Recenserad av  
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This is a book about everyday life in Brasilia, and about its contribution to the production of city-space, borrowing some of its concepts from the *Production of Space* by the French philosopher, *Henri Lefebvre*<sup>2</sup>. It aims at showing how individuals and small groups of urban dwellers give direction to changes in their physical environment when it imposes barriers upon their cultural expectations with respect to physical space. It shows how this pace of change proceeds through thousands of similar efforts towards an appropriation of space. It proposes far-reaching conclusions.

Brasilia represents an heroic deed of modernist architecture. A new concept for the physical structure of the city – the so-called modernist city – intended to achieve democracy, equality and absence of social segregation in a deeply segregated society. *Rosane Bauer* shows that despite the rhetorics of modernist city-planning the actual production of space and the process of allocation of newly built space have practically and symbolically reproduced the existing social segregation.

Hence the thesis can be read as proving perfectly wrong the modernist assumption that has come to be known as physical determinism: spatial change dictates social change. This is not a new result, but it is a further demonstration of an idea to

which many architects nowadays pay lip service. It was worth showing. Yet this is not the main ambition of this analysis. It is not meant to prove wrong the rhetorics of modernism, but rather to reach an understanding of the impact upon everyday life of a new city structure – the modernist space – that was actually implemented in the name of modernism. *Rosane Bauer* was not satisfied with observing that the discourse of modernist architecture failed to hold true, but she wanted to show practical consequences for every day life of modernist practice.

In order to achieve this purpose she has chosen to start from a theoretical analysis of the production of space in order to dissipate some of the ambiguities or of the confusions that may come from different meanings of the concept of space being used inadvertently allowing unwarranted conceptual leaps between social space and physical space. Following in the steps of *Henri Lefebvre*, she avoids a meta-physical definition of space and attempts instead to proceed to a study of its production – its "social construction" in contemporary sociological jargon. Thus she embarks upon a study of three aspects of its production: "social practice", "abstract representation" through concepts which anticipate actions taken by

socially dominant actors, the "imaginary molding of space"<sup>3</sup> which enables dominated actors to express their life-world through an appropriation of space. She proceeds then to a short survey of abstract representation of space among Brazilian architects, as a prelude to the introduction of the modernist space, which is itself an abstract representation of space endorsed by the State.

This is contrasted with a description of actual physical structures in three residential neighborhoods, one in Brasilia itself, *Superquadra 312 Norte* of the *Plano Piloto*, one in the oldest satellite town, *Bloco 8* in *Sobradinho*, and one in the most recent satellite town, *Bloco 431* of the *expansao* area in *Samambaia*. One important reason behind the choice of these two satellite cities along the *Plano Piloto* is that they are the only ones that embody modernist concepts of design. Within each of these three neighborhoods she has carried observations and interviews according to the principles of participant observation. They have been used to account both for the space of social practice, and for the space resulting from appropriation processes.

These contrasting levels of observation are setting the grounds for a discussion of the resultant new space which is the product of modernist

features and of a revival of traditional settings. She concludes that the inhabitants of Brasilia have achieved a transformation of the modernist city into a living city where they have achieved a sense of empowerment out of their capacity to regain a freedom to produce their own space.

This conclusion does not pretend to redeem modernism, but rather to understand the social processes of which it was a part in Brasilia. Let us read between the lines, because this is such an important example for contemporary city planning. It would seem that the production process of city-space in Brasilia could be proceeding from a series of political compromises where the state is using planning, and production of physical space, in order to strengthen its grip on its own workforce, the local *Nomenklatura* and its middle-class clients, while allowing both of them a privileged position in Brazilian society; while, at the same time,

allowing more economic freedom and insisting less on control of the working class, which it segregates more efficiently than in any other Brazilian city. It is fascinating to watch the contradictions which are developing in this city where the concentration of political power has brought economic prosperity to all classes of citizens, and, in the name of equality, has achieved the most spectacular example of social segregation, while at the same time, in order to keep a perfect image of an affluent modern society, it imposes more restrictions in their everyday life to the privileged and to the middle-class living in the *Plano Piloto* than to the middle and lower classes living in the satellite towns. The history of the unexpected consequences of modernist planning in Brasilia awaits further developments.

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## Notes

1. Bauer, Rosane, *Living with Brasilia: A Resident's Perspective of the Confrontation between Heroic Vision and Social Reality*, 126 pages, 13 figures and plans, 4 plates of 12 colour photographs each, Glossary, Index, Bibliography, Chalmers University of Technology, department of Architectural Design, Göteborg, 1997.
2. Lefebvre, Henri, *The Production of Space*, Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Blackwell, Oxford and Cambridge, 1991.
3. In the French text by Lefebvre it is called by a somewhat confusing name: *l'espace des représentations*.