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On the Threshold of Forgetting:
Amnesiac Identities and the Brazilian Capital

Nicole Sully

Centuries after Locke asserted the importance of memory to identity, Freudian psychology argued that what was forgotten was of equal importance as to what was remembered. The closing decades of the nineteenth century saw a rising interest in the nature of forgetting, resulting in a reassessment and newfound distrust of the long revered faculty of memory. The relationship between memory and identity was inverted, seeing forgetting also become a means for forging identity. This newfound distrust of memory manifested in the writings of Nietzsche who in 1874 called for society to learn to feel unhistorically and distance itself from the past - in what was essentially tantamount to a cultural forgetting. Following the Nietzschean call, the architecture of Modernism was also compelled by the need to 'overcome' the limits imposed by history. This paper examines notions of identity through the shifting boundaries of remembering and forgetting, with particular reference to the construction of Brazilian identity through the 'repression' of history and memory in the design of the Brazilian capital. Designed as a forward-looking modernist utopia, transcending the limits imposed by the country's colonial heritage, the design for Brasilia exploited the anti-historicist agenda of modernism to emancipate the country from cultural and political associations with the Portuguese Empire. This paper examines the relationship between place, memory and forgetting through a discussion of the design for Brasilia.
In recent decades ideas of memory have become common currency for a diverse array of disciplines, emerging as both an area of interest and contention. Beyond its common and obvious representation as a faculty of mental retention, the disciplines of psychology and philosophy have cast memory as a significant determinant of social and personal identity - an understanding that is also evinced by other disciplines. This fascination with memory as a subject of interdisciplinary study has seen it likewise emerge as worthy of interest in relation to architecture and place, particularly in reference to the city through the work of architects such as Aldo Rossi and the writings of, most notably, M. Christine Boyer. The interests of Rossi and Boyer in memory and its role in the construction of place have predominantly been concerned with aspects of inclusion. Of equal interest is the opposite perspective entailing the deliberate exclusion of memory. It is this exclusion of memory which has contributed to what Ian Hacking, more generally terms, the politics of memory, or what can easily be recast as the politics of forgetting.

In 1995, Ian Hacking posed the question "Why is it that the battles so often take place over what has been forgotten, in particular the terrain of forgotten pain?" Continuing, he stated: "Forgetting rather than ordinary remembering, is the present locus of mem- ory-politics." While Hacking positions the terrain of the forgotten as an area of considerable debate and anxiety, this can also play an important role in the creation of personal and cultural identity.

While investigations of the nature of memory have remained of paramount concern for some time, the closing decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a rising interest in the nature and consequences of forgetting. Stemming from developments in psychology regarding the increasing importance placed on forgetting, these interests were taken up by other disciplines such as philosophy and the arts. In philosophy, ideas regarding forgetting gained expression through the work of Nietzsche, while in the arts this interest found expression with the emergence of modernism. In the late 1950s the design and construction of the modernist city of Brasilia saw the deliberate exclusion of memory and historical references to project a new sense of Brazilian identity, free from associations with its colonial past. Discussing ideas of the shifting boundaries of memory and forgetting, and tracing their embodiment in modernist architecture, this paper seeks to examine ideas regarding the construction of identity through the 'repression' of history and memory in the design of the Brazilian capital.

Memory and Forgetting

Centuries after John Locke [1632-1704] asserted the importance of memory to personal identity, Freudian psychology, through the theorising of the unconscious, argued that what was forgotten was of equal importance as to what was remembered. The act of forgetting was also emphasised in the earlier research of the French psychologist Théodule Ribot [1839-1916], whose work exerted an important influence on subsequent studies of memory. Ribot [1881] asserted that the act of forgetting was an essential component of memory, writing:

"Without the total obliteration of an immense number of states of consciousness, and the momentary repression of many more, recollection would be impossible. Forgetfulness ... is not a disease of memory, but a condition of health and life."

While the ability to forget or temporarily repress information, according to Ribot, facilitates recollection, the act of forgetting was also construed as an essential component in orientating oneself in time. As a counterpart to ideas nurtured in psychological discourses, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche [1844-1900] argued for the importance of forgetting from a philosophical perspective. In The Use and Abuse of History [1874] Nietzsche discussed the importance of what he termed "the power of forgetting, or ... the capacity for feeling "unhistorically". Nietzsche asserted:

"We must know the right time to forget as well as the right time to remember, and instinctively see when it is necessary to feel historically and when unhistorically... the unhistorical and the historical are equally necessary to the health of an individual, a community, and a system of culture..."

Nietzsche remarked that the classical civilisation of Greece was underpinned by an 'unhistorical' sentiment - cultivated at the pinnacle of their civilisation's power - which was duly responsible for much of their society's richness. He asserted that, in contrast to the Greeks: "we moderns have nothing of our own. We only become worth notice by filling ourselves to overflowing with foreign customs, arts, philosophies, religions, and sciences". Continuing, Nietzsche condemned what he termed the malady of history, stating:

"Excess of history has attacked the plastic power of life that more understands how to use the past as a means of strength and nourishment. It is a fearful disease, and yet, if youth had not a natural gift for clear vision, no-one would see that it is a disease." He claimed that the only way to overcome this malady was through what he termed the 'unhistorical' and the 'super-historical'. The unhistorical he asserted was "the power, the art, of forgetting and of drawing a limited horizon round oneself", while the super-historical was the power that "turns the eyes from the process of becoming to that which gives existence an eternal and stable character - to art and religion."

Apart from these specific ideas expressed in philosophy, David Gross [2000] claims that modernity, in general, lead to an 'epistemological deflation of the value of memory'. Gross asserts that this was partly due to the research of the Théodule Ribot, Pierre Janet [1859-1947] and Hermann Ebbinghaus [1850-1909], which resulted in a reassessment and eventual distrust of the reliability of the long revered faculty of memory. Yet what perhaps began with a newfound distrust inherited from psychological discourses evolved in philosophy and the arts into an outright rejection of historical determinism.

Following the Nietzschean call to forget, the architecture of Modernism was also compelled by the need to 'overcome' history. In reflection of Modernism's anti-historicist agenda the opening sentences of the 'La Sarraz Declaration', from the inaugural meeting of
CIAM in 1928, stated:

"The destiny of architecture is to express the orientation of the age. Works of architecture can spring only from the present time. They therefore refuse categorically to apply in their working methods means that may have been able to illustrate past societies; they affirm today the need for a new conception of architecture that satisfies the spiritual, intellectual and material demands of present-day life."  

The La Sarraz declaration established the ability for architecture to recreate itself anew in response to the new age as a fundamental condition of modernity. The idea of a cultural forgetting, advocated by Nietzsche, was at the foundation of what it was to be modern. The La Sarraz declaration implied that it was only by overcoming history that one was able to respond to one’s time. Following psychological assumptions, forgetting enabled one to orientate oneself in time, and subsequently history. The idea of a cultural forgetting - the distancing or denial of one’s ties to the past – was a fundamental contributor to what emerged as the international style. Unburdened by historicism, architecture was free to become a global entity. The long established relation between memory and identity was inverted; seeing the forgotten also become a means of forging identity. Such ideas were embraced in the 1950s with the creation of Brasília, which was long anticipated as a means of forging a new sense of Brazilian identity.

The Evolution of Brasília

Inaugurated in April 1960, the idea of a new capital for Brazil symbolically located in the heart of the country arose as early as the mid-eighteenth century. Intended as a means to stimulate development of the country’s interior, it was also seen as a strategic security measure, affording protection from both external and internal threats. Schemes to move the capital inland were abandoned numerous times following its inception, in response to changing political circumstances and social agendas. To appreciate the issues from which the final design emerged it is beneficial to briefly examine a number of historical concerns which influenced the resolution to create a new Brazilian capital.

Twenty years after the idea for a new capital was conceived, Rio de Janeiro’s role as the Brazilian capital was extended when in 1807, under threat from Napoleon’s rapidly advancing troops, the Portuguese court fled Lisbon for the colony of Brazil. The combination of political exile and a captivation with the majestic beauty of the city saw Rio de Janeiro eventually declared the capital of the entire Portuguese Empire. Despite being the symbolic heart of the Empire, during this time speculation continued regarding the possibility of relocating the capital inland. The "interiorization of the metropolis" - as the process of relocation was called - was perceived as a patriotic concession and an important defence strategy, a position outlined by journalist Hipólito José da Costa, who in 1813 surmised:

"Rio de Janeiro has none of the qualities required in
The realised Brasilia scheme was the result of a national competition won by Lúcio Costa in 1957. Costa’s forward-looking modernist utopia, embracing CIAM planning principles and technologies of the machine age was not just a design solution, but a prescription for social order; with its plan superimposing an overall social unity on a formal one. Conceptually, Costa’s scheme was derived from notions of the functional city and was heavily influenced by Le Corbusier’s design for Chandigarh (of which construction had commenced in 1953), and his ideal schemes for ‘The City for Three Million Inhabitants’ [1922] and ‘The Radiant City’ [1930].

The realised scheme exploited the anti-historicist agenda of modernism in an attempt to emancipate the country from cultural and political associations with the Portuguese Empire. The modernist tones of Costa’s pilot plan were expressed and elaborated in Niemeyer’s individual building projects with forms ranging from the restrained simplicity of the archetypically modernist – such as Esplanade of the Ministries [1958-60] and the apartments in the superquadras - through to bold, sculptural free-form modernist objects in the tradition of Le Corbusier’s Chapel at Ronchamp [1954] - such as the Cathedral [1958-67] and the Plaza of the Three Powers [1957-58] - which characterised the monumental axis. Without shying away from symbolism or typology, Niemeyer’s buildings denied connections with Brazilian history to assert a global architecture which was later to be regarded as modernism become fundamentally Brazilian.

In 1975, Pevsner dismissively described the second interlude of modernism, exemplified by works such as Ronchamp and Brasilia’s Cathedral, stating such works were merely attempts: “to satisfy the cravings of architects for individual expression, the craving of the public for the surprising and fantastic, and for an escape out of reality into a fairy world.” Paradoxically, it was this individual expression that Pevsner dismissed as a matter of ego which was to embody the spirit of new Brazilian nationalism. The architecture and planning of Brasilia saw Brazilian identity being constructed – ideologically as well as architecturally.

In 1989, James Holston suggested that Costa’s competition submission was redolent with deliberate endeavours to dehistoricise the work, writing: “[I]t presents the founding of the city as if it had no history, as if it were not a response either to socio-economic conditions in Brazil in 1957 or to modernism in architecture. Rather it dehistoricizes its idea of Brasilia, hiding its agenda for social change in a mythology of universalizing design principles, ancient cities, and sacred planning techniques.”

Holston asserts this idea of dehistoricising was in itself a myth, suggesting such attempts were exaggerated and resulted in an inadvertent alignment of the ideals with historical precedent, firstly through the creation of what Holsten terms a “foundation myth” and secondly through relations to ideal societies. Holsten suggests Costa’s design rhetoric offered a thread of romanticism which was fundamentally at odds with the anti-historical agenda he presented. However, Holston’s damning critique of Brasilia fails to acknowledge a difference between historical precedent and symbolism, and thus undermining a number of his theories and inadvertently raising a number of issues with regard to the ambiguity of what constitutes memory or an historical reference, and where such lines can be drawn.

Niemeyer’s building, exemplified by the Cathedral and those in The Plaza of the Three Powers, dramatically embodied forms untainted by references to the past in an attempt to recreate Brazilian identity afresh. Yet the city represents more than an architectural version of a clean slate, it represents what can be regarded as a form of architectural amnesia. The architecture of Brasilia attempted to deny the memory of its colonial past by presenting an alternative that emerged apparently without tradition, an alternative that denied historicism. Yet somewhat paradoxically, heavily influenced by Le Corbusier and constructed in the final phases of modernity – decades after the movement’s conception - references to modernism had in themselves arguably become historical. Ironically, while Brazilian modernism was soon to become something distinctively ‘Brazilian’, it was itself a European importation. Brasilia, thus seemingly did not deny history entirely - it denied its own history, and particularly it denied sentimentality towards its own past, by embracing the architectural language of a global culture.

The blueprint for Brasilia’s fundamentally unsentimental approach to history and cultural memory was established in Costa’s submission for the pilot plan competition. In his proposal, Costa wrote of the naming system to be employed in the streets and zones of the city, stating: “the point of reference should be the monumental axis, dividing the city into Northern and Southern halves. The superblocks would be known by numbers, the residential buildings by letters, and finally the apartments would be designated in the usual way, so that an address would read, for example, N-S3-L, apt. 201.”

Costa’s clinical numerical approach was the antithesis of the traditional, commemorative approach where street names honour figures of historical or sentimental importance to the community as outlined by Daniel Millo [1992], who suggested that street names can act “as manifestations of a community’s collective memory.” Brasilia’s naming procedure - while emblematic of the rational geographical order imposed in the planning of the city - embodied what can be termed as a post-historical and anti-memorial approach. Interestingly forty years after its inauguration, Brasilia’s naming system speaks volumes with regard to the city’s identity. Even these unsentimental ‘names’ which act like Cartesian co-ordinates for one’s orientation in the city, reflect the origin and heritage of Brasilia as a uniform, rationally planned city – which privileges notions of rational order over sentiment and precedent.

The lack of historical references evident in the architectural aesthetics of Brasilia has ultimately contributed to much of what has been criticised about the
city. Many critics have seen Brasilia as too rational, too sterile, too surreal, and significantly much of this can be attributed to the relative unfamiliarity of language and forms employed, and particularly the lack of connection that these maintain to the preceding Brazilian culture. Rather than becoming a global city, it was read that Brasilia’s geographical isolation was seemingly magnified by this cultural isolation. An opinion exemplified by Simone de Beauvoir’s writings following her trip to Brasilia in 1960 with Jean-Paul Sartre. Writing of this journey, her attack on the city was scathing, stating: “I still retain the impression of having seen the birth of a monster whose heart and lungs are made to function artificially by methods devised at breathtaking cost.” After describing the solitude of their long journey through nothingness to reach Brasilia, de Beauvoir’s impression was firstly that it was like a “life size model” and secondly of what she regarded as the inhumanity of it all. While condemning the overall plan of the city, and what she considered its sterile and isolating elements, de Beauvoir praised Niemeyer’s individual buildings, writing: “Thanks to his measured extravagance, in this palace of functionaries one escapes – at last! – from the functional.”

The discomfort of the new was also alluded to by William Holford, one of the jury members of the Brasilia competition. Two years after its inauguration Holford wrote of some of the social problems he perceived, stating: “Where everything is new, the social, historical and atmospheric background which provides the great charm of long established towns is noticeably absent. . . . The housing areas have not grown up slowly enough to look as if they were rooted to the ground. There has been no time to mould the contours, and the playgrounds, to respond to traditional human use and custom; to create established gardens, and to grow mature trees. Most of the constructions look as if they were poised for flight.”

Beyond the absence of historical references, this sense was according to Holford accentuated by the fact that the buildings and city had not unfolded gradually in time, but rather looked uniformly planned and like they were constructed as part of an enormous building programme. The surprise at the speed at which Brasilia had been established was later reflected in a French film released four years after the city’s inauguration. Directed by Philippe de Broca, That Man From Rio [1964] saw its reluctant protagonists Agnes [Françoise Dorléac] and Adrien [Jean-Paul Belmondo] journey from Paris to Rio de Janeiro, Brasilia and finally the Amazon. Brasilia is presented as a surreal backdrop in reflection of the increasingly surreal situation the protagonists find themselves in. While in Brasilia an old friend of Agnes’ father, upon seeing her for the first time in many years states: “When I think you were only as tall as a doll. You grew a lot, just like Brazilia [sic]. Three years ago it was empty like the palm of my hand. A desert, nothing. We came here, and a few others and there you have it.”

The sense of surrealness depicted in That Man From Rio is still documented more than forty years after the city’s construction. Tom McDonough described the experience of the city from a visit in 1998, writing that the buildings are “tinged now with a distinct sense of science fiction, a sense of the alienness of these forms.” Continuing he states: “Brasilia is . . . in a sense, paradigmatic for our time, since it was the blueprint for a future that never arrived.” This perception of Brasilia belonging not to the future, present or past contributes to the surrealness McDonough observed; yet following the ideas observed in psychology that forgetting aids time orientation, Brasilia – if not of the present – was clearly distinguished from the past.

Like McDonough, many other writings on Brasilia seem to focus on ideas of time and tense. In 1964, David Snyder wrote: “Brasilia has achieved present tense. Although the construction of the new city is far from complete, it is of more importance to acknowledge that Brasilia now exists and lives.” Furthermore, the anachronistic elements of a future that never arrived, were also redolent in Simone de Beauvoir’s writings, who implied that the city may eventually succumb to the force of time and be absorbed by the harsh landscape, writing: “Man has wrestled this most arbitrary of cities from the desert, and the desert will take it back from him if ever his determination begins to weaken: it lies there on every side, menacing.”

This city that was intended to project its time has continuously been discussed as a temporal anomaly, a city without time. Paradoxically De Beauvoir characterised this anachronistic element as a fundamental trait of Brazilian identity, writing: “One of the most striking traits in the Brazilian character [is] bluff – it is living far beyond its means. It already has one foot in the future . . . yet it walks forward with only the poor tools it has inherited from the past.”

The Amnesiac Identity

The denial of history and memory, implicated in the design and rationale for Brasilia, has resulted in an interesting parallel to the idea of the amnesiac. The collective social amnesia expressed through the denial of historical precedent in Brasilia’s architecture, has arguably given rise to what can be regarded as an amnesiac identity. Following Ian Hacking’s [1986] theorisation of the relationship between identities and the construction of certain diseases, the sense of Brazilian identity established through the denial of their cultural origins gave rise to an identity which was essentially linked to the notion of their cultural repression. Consequently, the amnesiac identity, through its denial or repression of memory, speaks powerfully of memory. It is an identity, which is arguably constructed around not just innovation, but importantly absence. Thus absence becomes central to the amnesiac character and identity. The denial of blatant historicism in the architecture of Brasilia speaks as eloquently of what it excludes as what it includes. Thus in Brasilia the boundary between memory and forgetting is an eroded, ever-changing ‘threshold’.


Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul*, p. 213.

Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul*, p. 213.

The term is often forgotten as a site of contention, is certainly the case when associated with personal or cultural trauma such as, for example, the holocaust.


The relocation of the capital was recollected to the agenda with Jose de Andrade's study titled a "Man and the Notions of Necessity and Means of Building a New Capital in the interior of Brazil." W. Holford, "Brasilia: The Federal Capital of Brazil" *Geographical Journal*, v. 128, n. 1, 1962, pp. 15-17. p. 15. It was at this time that it was first suggested the new capital be named Brasiliana, although until the 1950s the city was known by its authoritarian boundaries and was only speculatively determined in 1982.


Existing inland settlements had been predominantly confined to those initiated by either the search for or location of mineral deposits.

In 1956, Kubitschek declared: "This is a historic dream ... we are building it with the same spirit as those long-gone pioneers, the men who braved the hitherland in our souls eager to found a civilization in the very heart of Brazil ... I turn my eyes to my country of tomorrow, I forsee a new dawn with unwavering faith and unlimited confidence in its greatness." J. Kubitschek, Speech delivered 10/2/1956, cited in Couto, & Matos, *Brasil, Brasilia, e Brasileiros*, p. 223.


The idea of the pioneer spirit was also alluded to in Couto's winning design from the design competition for Brasilia. Couto wrote in his competition submission that the cruciform plan was derived from the idea of marking a cross on the landscape as a mark of possession, writing "Founding a city in the wilderness is a deliberate act of conquest, a gesture after the manner of the pioneering colonial traditions." J. Costa, *Relatório do Plano piloto de Brasilia, Governo do Distrito Federal*, 1991, p. 77.


Interestingly Le Corbusier expressed an interest in participating in the design of Brasilia, however his offer was rejected in favour of promoting a Brazilian identity through the employment of Brazilian architects and planners. On this matter Courvoisier wrote: "He did not receive the courtesy of a reply: times had changed and neither Kubitschek nor Niemeyer wanted an international star involved in an enterprise designed to demonstrate the strength of a modern Brasil." L. Cavalcanti, *When Brazil Was Modern: Guide to Architecture 1926-1969*, [transl. J. Tolman], New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003.


Holtzon, *The Modernist City*, p. 56-60.

In Costa's competition submission he described that he entered the competition due to what was tantamount to a design epiphany with regard to the project, writing: "It was not my intention to enter the competition, as a matter of fact I am not doing so — I merely happened on a possibility which was not sought but, so to speak, took shape almost spontaneously." Lucio Costa, *Relatório do Plano piloto de Brasilia, Brasilia: Governo do Distrito Federal*, 1991, p. 17.

James Holston argues that this statement was an attempt by Costa to distance himself from both precedent and social considerations involved in the planning of Brasilia. Holston has famously described Costa's statement constitutes what he terms a "foundation myth," suggesting that a foundation myth "provide[s] precedents for the orders of lived experience ... Justify[ing] why things are the way they are ... by relating the precedents which ... brought these things into being and gave them their defining attributes." Holston, *The Modernist City*, pp. 56-66.

L. Costa, *Relatório do Plano piloto de Brasilia, Brasilia: Governo do Distrito Federal*, 1991, p. 83. Interestingly, the naming system for the city quarters and streets has even been described as one of the more contentious elements of the design. On a trip to Brasilia in June 2003, I observed through conversations with a number of locals, that while they did not agree with many of the traditional criticisms of the city (e.g. its sterility etc.), they did dislike the impersonal naming system.


Having examined the evolution of naming practices in reflection of politics and ideas of commemoration, Milo concludes his study by examining street names assigned in cities created in the 1950s. Observing new French towns - formed through the amalgamation of existing towns. - Milo notes the rising influence of 'official' or 'geographical' names - such as those of artists, musicians or plants. To accommodate the collective memories of two communities, these towns had chosen street names which reflected less specific references to cultural memory. Milo speculates: "Perhaps what these new 'official' names allow us to understand is the advent of a new city as a post-history and an anti-memory." Yet interestingly the names that Milo lists, while more neutral in nature than those historically assigned in France, still reflect a sense of the social and cultural identity - if not those specific to the particular region. Milo, *Street Names*, p. 398.


Hacking suggests that the 'construction' of certain diseases gave rise to certain identities in the definition or labelling of a number of diseases made it possible to enumerate people according to these categorisations. For example, Hacking notes that Multiple Personality Disorder did not exist prior to 1875 (although
people with identical symptoms did exist) because the tools to label one such were not in existence prior to this. The labelling of these symptoms as Multiple Personality Disorder gave rise not just to a diagnosis but also an identity. Hacking, *Making Up People*, in T.C. Heller, M. Sosna, & D. E. Wellery, (eds.) *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality and the Self in Western Thought*, California: Stanford University Press, 1986. pp. 222-238. pp. 222, 223.