

## **Brasilia neighborhood unity: a re-reading of its meaning, limits and possibilities**

### **Unidade de vizinhança de Brasília: uma releitura de seu significado, limites e possibilidades**

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#### **Maria de Fátima Magalhães Mariani**

Master of Science in Psychology, Architect and Urbanist

Institution: Secretaria de Estado de Educação do Distrito Federal (SEEDF)

Address: Edifício Venâncio, Asa Norte, Brasília - DF

E-mail: fatimariani12@gmail.com

#### **Leandro Magalhães Mariani**

Master of Science in Agronomy, Civil Engineer

Institution: Universidade de Brasília (UNB)

Address: Campus Darcy Ribeiro, Asa Norte, Brasília - DF

E-mail: leandro.m.mariani@gmail.com

#### **Thiago Brazeiro Carlos**

PhD in Civil Engineering

Institution: Universidade de São Paulo (USP)

Address: Av. Trabalhador São Carlense, São Carlos - SP

E-mail: thiago\_brazeiro@hotmail.com

#### **Rodrigo Almeida Freitas**

Master of Arts in Occupational Safety Engineering, Civil Engineer

Institution: Universidade de Coimbra

Address: Rua Sílvio Lima, Universidade de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal

E-mail: rodrigo.almeida.freitas@gmail.com

#### **ABSTRACT**

The objective of this article is to analyze the limits and possibilities of the pilot neighborhood unity, anchored in the existing literature on the history and experience of the neighborhood unity in Lúcio Costa's urban project. Among the significant concepts in the debate about Brasília's residential superblocks are "isolation" and "exclusion" in relation to preserving intimacy and tranquility of living. Limitations and possibilities are part of the experience of a neighborhood unity in Brasília in the opinion of people who live in the superblock. Limiters include vacant spaces on holiday days and weekends, violence, lack of parking, great noise, great mobility of cars and pedestrians due to events on the main axis. On the other hand, public schools, subway station, proximity to public and private health units, commerce, transportation and job opportunities stand out as favorable aspects. The article allowed us to understand more clearly the concept of neighborhood unity and its relationship with the city of Brasília, as well as serving as an incentive to continue researching the topic.

**Keywords:** neighborhood unity, Brasília superblocs, modern urbanism.

## RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é analisar limites e possibilidades da unidade piloto de vizinhança tendo como ancoragem a literatura existente sobre a história e a experiência de unidade de vizinhança no projeto urbanístico de Lúcio Costa. Dentre os conceitos significativos no debate acerca das superquadras residenciais de Brasília estão “isolamento” e “exclusão” na relação com preservação da intimidade e tranquilidade de habitar. Limitações e possibilidades integram a experiência de unidade de vizinhança em Brasília na opinião de sujeitos que convivem na superquadra. Dentre os limitadores destacam-se espaços vagos em dias de feriado e no final de semana, violência, falta de estacionamento, grande barulho, grande mobilidade de carros e pedestres em função dos eventos no eixo principal. Por outro lado, as escolas públicas, estação de metrô, proximidade de unidades de saúde pública e particular, comércio, locomoção e oportunidade de trabalho destacam-se como aspectos favoráveis. O artigo permitiu compreender com mais clareza o conceito de unidade de vizinhança e sua relação com a cidade de Brasília, bem como serviu de incentivo para continuar pesquisando a respeito do tema.

**Palavras-chave:** unidade de vizinhança, superquadras de Brasília, urbanismo moderno.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Brasília's pilot plan was designed with well-defined sectors to serve its residents. Based on Le Corbusier's rational model, priority was given to the superblocs that would constitute the neighborhood unitys. The idea of developing a residential architecture in Brazil that would offer users basic services, saving them from long commutes, dates back to the 1940s. In 1950, the idea of neighborhood unitys became evident with the construction of Brasília.

What does neighborhood unity mean? How is the neighborhood unity configured today in the opinion of the subjects who live in SQS 108 and 308? What aspects are considered relevant to discuss? Based on these questions, this article seeks to understand the meaning of a neighborhood unity in the opinion of the people who live there, focusing on the aspects highlighted as limiting and favorable to life in this model of living.

The first part of the article will discuss the definition of the concept, characteristics of the buildings and the first applications of the neighborhood unity. Next, the aspects of Lúcio Costa's urban project for the pilot plan, where the superblocs are located, with emphasis on the pilot project located in South Wing. A brief analysis of the existing literature and a critical analysis of the aspects highlighted by the interviewed subjects will be made. .

## **2 NEIGHBORHOOD UNITY, CONCEPT AND FIRST APPLICATIONS**

The neighborhood unity model was experimented with in other cities in Brazil even before the construction of Brasília. In the case of Goiânia, in 1936 to 1938, the urban architect Armando Augusto de Godoy designed the southern sector of the city, taking as a reference Radburn, designed by Clarence Stein, in 1928 in New Jersey, United States (REGO, 2017).

In turn, Clarence Stein and Henry Wright were inspired by Ebenezer Howard's garden city principles. At the end of the 19th century, Howard idealized for England cities free from pollution and in perfect harmony with the countryside. The Radburn community, in the United States, was built in the automobile age and embodies Clarence Perry's project of neighborhood unity.

Therefore, the concept of neighborhood unity is attributed to Clarence Perry in the New York regional plan in 1929. The idea of neighborhood unity comprises an urban sector to organically serve the population; a nearby primary school where children could walk, free from traffic; and a park and leisure area, shops to serve the residential complex.

## **3 UNITE D' HABITATION / LE CORBUSIER**

Clarence Perry's concept of neighborhood unity became known and valued by modernist architects, including Le Corbusier. From the III International Congress of Modern Architecture onwards, neighborhood unities present themselves as an innovative solution to the housing issue. The Athens Charter, which resulted from discussions at the IV CIAM and has Le Corbusier as its defender, will incorporate the concept into its principles of urbanism (SCHERER, 1993).

The housing unity experience in Marseille is one of the most significant neighborhood unity experiences in France. Le Corbusier's 1952 project, the Unite d' Habitation was an urban solution to serve on a large scale a population torn apart by the effects of the Second World War, including the housing deficit.

Le Corbusier created a “vertical garden city” where residents could lead a private and collective life without having to travel long distances to shop, have fun or take their children to school. The housing unity was built to serve up to 1600 residents spread over eighteen floors (KROLL, 2016).

The Marseille housing complex is entirely made of exposed concrete, the terrace consists of a running track, a club, a kindergarten, a gym and a shallow swimming pool.

Shops, medical facilities, and a small hotel are part of the building. The Marseille housing unity prioritizes the five points of Le Corbusier's brutalist architecture that will influence the residential blocks designed by Lúcio Costa in the Brasília Pilot Plan, namely: building on pilotis to favor circulation, landscaping and living space underneath the building; garden terrace with its collective functionality; free plan; free facade; ribbon window that highlights the horizontality of the building.

#### **4 ABOUT THE URBAN PROJECT AND ITS DIVERSITIES**

The neighborhood unity, known as Lúcio Costa's pilot project, was defined with the following composition: superblocks of residential blocks, commerce, church, neighborhood club, cinema, health center, library, police station and educational complex with kindergarten, park-school and classroom-school. The latter integrated the philosophy and educational proposal of Anísio Teixeira (VASQUES, 2015).

Following the example of Le Corbusier's "vertical garden city", providing life in the place to live, reducing traffic and movement over long distances was a relevant aspect of Lúcio Costa's urban design. The superblock would then be the domain of pedestrians, writes Vasques (2015), and the car would be part of people's intimacy and comfort, as if "domesticated".

The new capital, Brasília, was idealized by the urban planner as a "park city" for a population that did not depend on cars to go to the bakery, school, or gas station, health and other service units. This model is also close to the organicity of the urban sector by Clarence Perry.

People walking freely in the superblocks, the meeting, the conversation between passersby, all of this would remind them of the interior cities that still have this style of life and the very objective was to rescue the principles of the traditional city. The superblocks are located along the road axis and the basic elements, such as commerce local, church, schools, neighborhood club, police station, library and post office constitute a set of four superblocks. Vasques (2015) highlights that only superblocks 107, 307, 108 and 308 Sul would meet the requirements proposed by the pioneer urban planner, transcription below:

"(...) only one Neighborhood Unity was complete, with all the equipment provided for in the original project – the group formed by Superblocks 107, 307, 108 and 308 Sul, built in the early days of Brasília. The others are incomplete and do not have the expected community facilities, other than local businesses, and churches are also common. Cinemas and neighborhood clubs,

for example, only exist in the aforementioned South Wing Unit. Class Schools are much more common than Kindergartens and Park Schools.” (p. 59).

It is worth noting that many of the land intended to make up neighborhood unitys remain vacant. Neighborhood unitys also include restaurants that were not built. The vacant lots between the superblocks are controversial elements in the city's land occupation. Those intended for RUVs (neighborhood unity restaurants) have already been sold, points out Vasques (op. cit.), some have been built and others may yet emerge.

A common aspect of those who visit Brasília is to consider that all the superblocks are the same. In addition to the difference in topography whose unevenness is characteristic of some, there are also differences in block modulations. In some blocks, the unevenness is overcome with uneven steps along the route. This aspect is noticeable at SQS 308 where a square was built.

In other superblocks, the ground floor raised above the ground required the installation of ramps and guardrails. In others, railings were permitted to prevent the risk of accidents in the elevated spaces above the garages. When analyzing the existing differences, it must be taken into account that Lúcio Costa was not the only architect to design the urban plan for the superblocks. Other architects from different generations designed their urban plans and left their marks (VASQUES, 2015).

However, the modulations are different with the emergence of new superblocks. Only those that were built at the beginning of the city's construction, in 1960 and 1970, bear similarities to the original project. The differences were already foreseen in the urban plan, and the occupancy rate must be respected.

The occupancy rate comprises around 15% in each superblock measuring around 280 meters by 280 meters. A green belt surrounds the superblock made up of residential blocks with three or six floors on free pilotis. Instead of lots, projections. “The rest would be free spaces with only small community facilities, such as playgrounds, sports courts, as well as Kindergartens and Class Schools” (VASQUES, 2015, p.57).

In the 1957 Pilot Plan Report, Lúcio Costa points out that in each superblock the blocks could be arranged differently. However, at least two basic principles would have to be maintained: “ uniform maximum size, perhaps six floors and pilotis, and separation of vehicle traffic from pedestrian traffic ” (Lúcio Costa, Pilot Plan Report, 1957, apud.. VASQUES, 2015, p. 42).

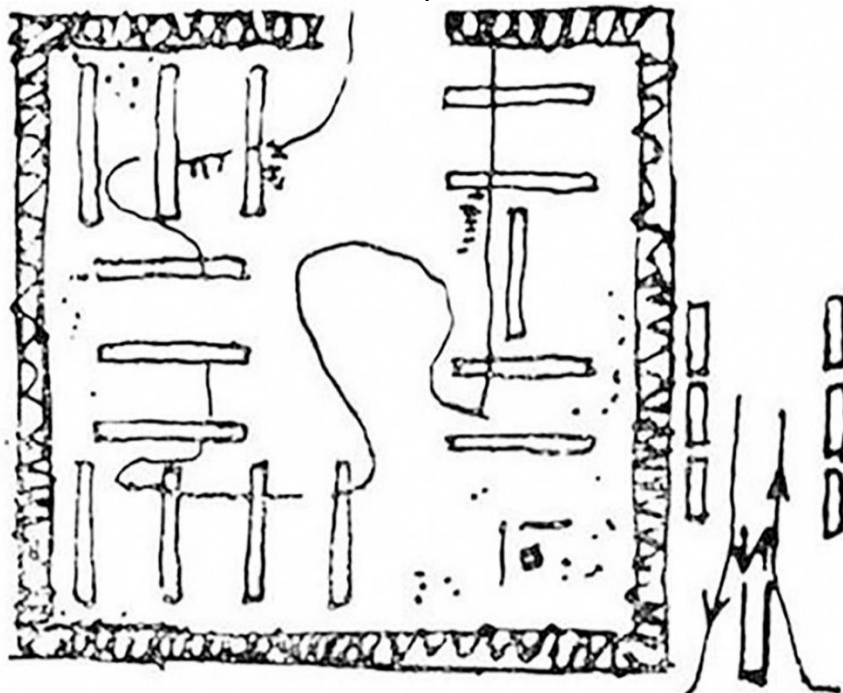
At another time, the urban planner is flexible, not opposing architectural interventions in the future, as long as the interventions in the superblocks are within the relevance and necessity with broad freedom of the architects. And again it reinforces the need to respect the control of the template, low occupancy rate, row of trees around the superblock, highlighted by Vasques, 2015, p. 43.

In the shape of the residential blocks, the five points of Le Corbusier's modern architecture are striking, highlighting the ribbon windows and stilts. However, the differences become more pronounced as new superblocks are built. The new modulations are composed of balconies and gain volumes on the roof. This is especially visible in the North Wing.

The transformations also occur in traffic within the superblocks, where there is a noticeable increase in the circulation of vehicles and overcrowding in parking lots inside.

of some superblocks. Such changes change the original configuration of the neighborhood unity, also interfering with the landscape. Diversity is also observed in the perception of people who live or work on the block. In the experience of living in the neighborhood unity, limits and possibilities are constructed based on the history of each subject and their relationship with the neighborhood unity. The figure below shows a sketch of the Brasília superblock.

Figure 1 - Sketch of the Brasília Superblock, prepared by Lucio Costa and included in the Pilot Plan Report



Source: Arquivo Público do Distrito Federal, apud. FERREIRA, 2008, p. 13.

## 5 THE CURRENT SETTINGS

The neighborhood unity has survived since the founding of Brasília and has been the stage for three to four generations since the first public servants who were transferred from their cities of origin. The superblocs built and populated by people, not only those who live there, but also those who transit, work, study, stroll or visit, continue building their future.

In this way, limits and possibilities are part of the experience of neighborhood unity in Brasília in the opinion of individuals who live in the superblock. Limiters include vacant spaces on holiday days and weekends, violence, lack of parking, great noise due to nearby bars, great mobility of cars and pedestrians due to events on the main axis. On the other hand, public schools, subway station, proximity to public and private health units, commerce, transportation and job opportunities stand out as favorable aspects. This is what urban planner Lúcio Costa wrote:

“Brasília is, in fact, a synthesis of Brazil with its positive and negative aspects, thus expressing, live, the contradictions of Brazilian society. And if there is a contrast there, this is simply due to the fact that the city was born to be the capital of the country, that is, to have a symbolic presence not only now, but tomorrow and always, since the life of capitals is counted by centuries” (Statement recorded in text dated January 1, 1990, contained in page no. 6 of the federal listing process, Proc. no. 1.305-T-90, apud VASQUES, 2015, p. 28).

The superblock is different from a condominium, points out Maria Elisa Costa, daughter of urban planner Lúcio Costa, as the superblock is public and does not belong to the resident. Walking under the blocks is not supposed to be a source of embarrassment, neither for those who live there, nor for those passing through. The presence of a doorman, free pilotis, and the absence of fences are common characteristics of superblocs, as shown in the following transcription:

“The floor is public – the residents belong to the block, but the block does not belong to them – and this is the big difference between a super block and a condominium. There are no fences, no guards, and yet, the freedom to come and go does not constrain or inhibit the resident from enjoying their territory, and the continuous visibility ensured by the pilotis contributes to security”. (Maria Elisa Costa and Adeildo Viegas de Lima, Brasília 57/85: from the pilot plan to the Pilot Plan, 1985, apud VASQUES, 2015, p. 36).

However, some aspects of the neighborhood unity are no longer preserved, within the constituent principles defended by Lúcio Costa. A common aspect nowadays are the barriers created around the blocks. The testimony of a resident of the superblock for over

40 years reflects well the meaning of the pilotis and the consequences of private interventions in the residential area:

“(…) the barrier-free pilotis provides clear visual and pedestrian access on the ground floor, thus allowing the association of inhabitants and outsiders, conditioned on the continuity of the public space and the fluidity of the movement of any passers-by” (VASQUES, *ibid.* p. , 63).

The resident questions the barriers that take away the originality of the neighborhood unity and interfere with its functionality:

“(…) there are few 'genuine pilotis' because the majority of residential blocks have isolated themselves through gaps, railings and hedges built by condominium owners jealous of their properties. As a result, little is 'available' on the ground in the supercourt and the 'shaded strips for walking and leisure’ (VASQUES, *ibid.* p. , 63).

For Ferreira & Gorovitz (2008) “transgressions”, increasingly recurrent in the space of neighborhood unities, in the residential or commercial area, are linked to the roots of Brazilian patriarchy. Traditional patrimonialism remains in evidence and the notion of public and private domain still generates a lot of confusion in the social imagination. In this context, the authors emphasize:

The imbalance is revealed in the increasingly frequent transgressions against the integrity of the project, the disregard and undue appropriation of public spaces, privatizing them in the superblocks through the closure and closure of pilotis and reforms that particularize the blocks to the detriment of the block's identity and unity ( FERREIRA and GOROVITZ, 2008, p. 28).

Architectural design alone was not able to overcome these and many other dichotomies and the myth of the “fantasy place ”, utopian, emerged. However, I do not analyze the neighborhood unity from this perspective but rather from good architecture. The architecture may not have the formality that prevents the homeless population from occupying vacant marquees in the commercial area or deactivated police station. Nor should limiting socialization, activities to meet the daily needs of the place where one lives. Those who inhabit, those who live are people endowed with intentions, feelings and therefore plasticity.

Although there is the criticism that the generosity of neighborhood architecture is restricted to the Pilot Plan and does not reach the significant population of other locations, the superblocks cannot be left aside from the social fabric. From this perspective, Michel de Certeau (2005) talks about ways of living in everyday life and emphasizes that this is

reinvented every moment. The reinvention of everyday life takes the form of “the arts of making, living and cooking” . Everyday life is also a stage for memories and stories.

Superblocks have this nature, encouraging the invention of everyday life, like their vacant spaces that generate discomfort and at the same time possibilities. In the case of the southern superblocs 107, 307, 108, 308, while the square is empty, the meeting and gathering of people takes place along the curb of the “Little Church” parking lot. There they have hot dogs that are among the seven best in Brasília. and an arabic food truck that operates at night. Every other day, vegetable vendors set up shop on the lawn between the blocks and on Saturday an open market selling organic products attracts residents and people who pass by the block, images below.

Figure 2 – Vegetable fair at SQS 309.



Source: Maria de Fátima M. Mariani.

Figure 3 – Fruit and vegetable stalls at the fair installed on Saturdays at SQS 309, Brasília-DF.



Source: Maria de Fátima M. Mariani.

## 6 CONSIDERATIONS

The literature consulted allowed us to understand more clearly the concept of neighborhood unity and its relationship with the city of Brasília, as well as serving as an incentive to continue researching the topic. It is clear in the evolutionary process of creating cities that the search for the best solution to meet the needs of the population requires cities that are planned and aligned with the defense of the environment and the well-being of the residents.

In large cities, mobility has become a problem that grows every day. Neighborhood unities emerged in an attempt to make people life more autonomous and delimited spaces according to their functions.

Every urban arrangement has its pros and cons, and neighborhood unities could not be any different. Cities are made of people and needs change. Thus, Lúcio Costa's

urban project has shown that it is not watertight and has undergone adaptations, such as ramps and other elements to meet mobility needs.

On the other hand, there are interventions that constitute violations of the proposed urban and even collective and citizen order. Hence the importance of social mobilization, of organizing skills where everyone can develop a feeling of co-responsibility with the issues of the place where they live.

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