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MYTHS OF MODERNITY – NOTES ABOUT ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN PLANNING OF BRASILIA

MITY NOWOCZESNOŚCI – UWAGI O ARCHITEKTURZE I URBANISTYCE BRASILII

Abstract

The present, duplicated by the alternative reality of the Internet and all kinds of indirect reception, builds a picture filled with myths. More than 50 years ago, one of the largest urban and architectural projects of the 20th century, which was the construction of the capital of Brazil, was completed. However, do the buildings erected on a characteristic plan testify to the avant-garde of this project, or do they create a myth and an illusory image of “a dream of power”? The article presents an analysis of selected elements in the field of architecture and urban planning, trying to provide an answer to the question asked – to resolve the dissonance contained in the title.

Keywords: contemporary architecture, theory, perception, Brasilia

Streszczenie

Współczesność, powielona przez alternatywną rzeczywistość Internetu i wszelakich form pośredniego odbioru, buduje obraz wypełniony mitami. Ponad 50 lat temu zrealizowano jedno z największych przedsięwzięć urbanistyczno-architektonicznych XX w. jakim była realizacja stolicy Brazylii. Czy jednak budowle wzniesione na charakterystycznym planie zaświadczać o awangardzie tego projektu, czy też tworzą mit i złudny obraz „snu o potędze”? W artykule przedstawiono analizę wybranych elementów architektury i urbanistyki, próbując przedstawić odpowiedź na zadane pytanie – rozstrzygnąć zawarty w tytule dysonans.

Słowa kluczowe: architektura współczesna, teoria, postrzeganie, Brasilia

1. INTRODUCTION

Perhaps only in the case of numerically recorded data can we talk about knowledge, in other cases any attempts to present the surrounding reality only come close to its boundaries. Like Marco Polo's *Description of the World*, they build a certain image of things, but it is so inaccurate that it is closer to a myth than to a set of irrefutable facts. In this context art remains intriguing, as it is by definition an interpretation or re-interpretation of reality made by the author-creator with the use of means and forms characteristic of a given field.

In view of this observation, we can consider the phenomenon of Brasília – an imaginary new capital of a new, multicultural nation. Its significance was described by Sigfried Giedion: “Brazil, living in the circle of South American revolutions, introduced into its architecture the splendor of lines and forms in numerous impressive buildings and in remarkable designs.”¹ It is impossible to ignore the role of Brazilian architecture in shaping the contemporary language of the art of construction of the 20th and the 21st century.

Selected examples of architecture located in the spatial structure of Brasília were analysed in order to make it possible to refer to the issue of the creation and existence of a myth in architecture, as well as formulate inferences relating to the theses of the conference concerning the search for the myths of contemporary architecture. The study concerned the analysis of buildings of various aesthetics, sizes and functions. The case studies were based both on the study of the literature and on *in situ* empirical experience. The considerations also include references to issues from other fields of art and culture, taking into account their impact on human perception.

2. THE CITY

After three hundred years of the colonial period, the idea of “unifying” ethnically and culturally diverse Brazilian people seemed right. And it was this idea that lay at the heart of the search for a place for the new capital of Brazil. It can be considered a manifestation of creative, modern thinking, and the words of D. Sudjic seem to emphasize it: “Brasília was a political foundation: the affirmation of a nation that turned its back on the country’s coastal, colonial cities. Its monumental architecture set out a claim to modernity.”² The idea of changing the location of the Brazilian capital was not new and dates back to the times of the “Patriarch of Independence” – José Bonifácio de Andrada, who in the 19th century already called for moving the capital.³ However, it was President Juscelino Kubitschek who initiated this process. Lúcio Costa’s design won a public contest (1957) and the main buildings were designed by Oscar Niemeyer. The construction of the new capital began in 1956, in line with the slogan “fifty years of progress in five.” The official inauguration took place on April 21, 1960.⁴

It is sometimes believed that the city plan was inspired by a condor or a plane, but its prototype was much simpler – as Lúcio Costa himself explains,⁵ it is a cross, two intersecting lines indicating a place on the map. Further steps transforming the original sign into a symbol-plan of the future city resulted from further searches: local topography, better orientation towards the sides of the world, and in the final move – determining an equilateral triangle, which was supposed to mark the urbanized area.

The plan of Brasília – an ideal city for the 20th century – is very detailed compared to other such designs, as can be seen in Lúcio Costa’s drawings and his commentary. It draws attention to a number of issues that were supposed to build monumental, urban space, worthy

¹ S. Giedion, *Przestrzeń, czas i architektura. Narodziny nowej tradycji*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1968, p. 8.

² D. Sudjic, *Język miast*, Karakter, Kraków 2017, p. 52.

³ Until 1960, Rio De Janeiro was the official capital of Brazil.

⁴ Epstein writes more about Brasília’s history and its economy and in *Brasilia, Plan and Reality. A Study of Planned and Spontaneous Urban Development*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1973.

⁵ Cf. *Relatório do plano piloto de Brasília*, O Governo, Brasília 1991.

of the capital of the state, but at the same time – modern! Out of a dozen or so points (or rules), at least a few are worth mentioning:

- application of simple rules of road transport – including elimination of junctions, and introduction of central express lanes and side lanes for local traffic of residential sectors along this axis;
- all the urban and administrative centres, the cultural sector, the amusement centre, the sports centre, the barracks, warehouses, minor local industry, and the station, were organized and arranged in a natural way along the axis transverse to the Residential Axis, which in this way became the Monumental Axis of the system;
- the banking and commercial sectors, together with the office buildings, were located taking into consideration the intersection of both axes, but in accordance with the assumptions of the urban composition;
- the intersection of the axes somehow “forced” the creation of a platform, where cinemas, theatres, restaurants, etc. were to find their place;
- separation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic;
- the triangular plaza and the basic government buildings arranged in accordance with the principle of the separation of powers is a reference to elementary geometry, the foundations of Greek democracy.

Lúcio Costa introduced further guidelines to his plan, his drawings and descriptions, indicating the location of the functions necessary for the existence of the city.⁶ The overriding principles seemed to be: composition, functionality and diversity, and – first of all – modernity.

The collision-free, multi-stage and complicated system of vehicular transport, which was to form the backbone of the urban composition of a futuristic city, perversely became the greatest pain of contemporary Brasília. The width of the lanes intended for vehicular transport isolates individual areas, separating them from other functions.

Today, the original plan of futuristic Brasília is still legible in its structure. In the following years, however, the city underwent transformations and expansion. The plan shows, not always controlled, “spreading” of the centre onto the neighbouring areas, which surround the now historic centre. It should be noted, however, that from the perspective of more than several dozen years, this process is also visible in most European cities – it seems to be a natural consequence of the development of a given centre. Contrary to Brasília’s tendency to expand, there are still undeveloped areas within its centre. As if the city, if one can talk about its anthropomorphization, has changed its priorities – it has lost interest. In Brazil’s capital, investments are still being made, schools and places to work and rest are being built, and housing estates are being expanded.

3. ARCHITECTURE

When we say “Brasília,” we say the city’s name; however, we don’t think about its structure or layout, but about buildings that make up this space. We see afterimages of well-known or once-seen images of places, which are associated with the capital of Brazil. Because a city in

⁶ It was assumed that the sports sphere, as well as ministerial one, would exist, the localisation of the university was indicated – and also an artificial lake Paranoá of 48 km² was created. Around it, one can find the Presidential Palace, restaurants, marinas and private villas.

its structure is not only a plan – even so extraordinary – but most of all it is made of buildings that fill the structure and shape the character of this place.

The modernity of Brasília's structure is visible in many various spatial systems – various meaning “different” from those historic ones. This difference sometimes determines the uniqueness of a place, making it not only beautiful, but also unique in its beauty. Sometimes, however, by building a system different from the traditional one, by looking for novelty, it generates a certain duality, a contradiction between positive and negative features.

One such example could be the National Congress buildings. The characteristic twin towers dominate the urban space and at the same time serve as a specific end to the *Eixo Monumental*. The composition is completed by a flat building which is the plateau for the domes of the parliamentary chambers above – the lower house has a dome “open” upwards, the senate – a more conservatively closed, traditional one. In this way we have the most important element of the composition formally emphasised – the complex intended for democratic authorities (not church or feudal ones), but at the same time the congress buildings are separated from the city, cut off by 6 lanes, raised upwards. They are clearly visible, exposed, but simultaneously inaccessible.

This narrative of duality is also visible in the space of the Plaza of the Three Powers. The plaza is flanked by the buildings related to the authorities: the National Congress, the Presidential Palace and the Supreme Court, but similarly to the case described above – the modernity of the automotive industry is transformed here into the modern equivalent of the walls that flanked a castle in the past. As Sigfried Giedion emphasizes,

The current situation is completely different. The closing walls are gone. High towers must be bound with low buildings. Squares without side walls come into existence. One of the first solutions of this type is the triangular Plaza of the Three Powers in Brasília (1957–1960), where the dominant complex of senate, congress and administration buildings is freely connected with lower buildings – the Presidential Palace and the Supreme Court – situated at the corners of the triangle. There are no walls here: *le jeu savant des volumes dans l'espace*.⁷

As already mentioned, in the area of the intersection of both main compositional axes, majestic buildings were located: the Cláudio Santoro National Theater (designed by O. Niemeyer, 1958–1966), the Leonel Brizoli National Library and the Honestino Guimarães National Museum (designed by O. Niemeyer, 1999–2006). The Cathedral was located nearby (but in the government sector). Looking at this accumulation of buildings of various forms and uses, one can see how Niemeyer's words materialized in buildings, “urban planning creates a place, I create architecture.”⁸

There was a place for a theatre in Brasília's plan, but due to height differences and roads running on each side, the building was effectively cut off from the city. Designed in the form of a truncated pyramid with a trapezoidal projection, the National Theatre is home to three theatres and accompanying facilities. Several buildings are located on the other side of the main axis. The library is a composition of cuboidal blocks, but the museum adjacent to it has a curved form of a dome with a long straight entrance ramp and the second one running along an arc, which gives the impression that it was only formally needed. The specific sequence of various forms ends with the equally characteristic dome of the Cathedral, also designed by Oscar Niemeyer (production 1959–1970).

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

⁸ P. Jodidio, *Niemeyer*, Taschen, Köln 2012, p. 7.

Stanisław Latour and Adam Szymiski emphasize that this building is “an example of architecture full of symbolic vision and artistic experience, in line with the spirit of Corbusier’s projects from Chandigarh or Firminy.”⁹ Also in this composition,¹⁰ the formal separation of the building from the neighborhood is visible. Freed from any “unnecessary” additions, such as an entrance or a belfry, the dome of the Cathedral emanates only with its purist shape.

“Unlimited freedom of artistic forms,” wrote Niemeyer, “opposes the slave subordination to technology and functionalism [...], allowing an atmosphere of inspiration and poetry to be introduced [...]. I had the courage to overthrow all taboos established by functionalism in architecture and I declare that the pursuit of beauty justifies everything, because it also fulfils a certain function – probably the most important in architecture.”¹¹

So-called superquadras require an independent analysis. The city is not only a place for work, leisure and entertainment, trade, or the seat of the authorities (as is the case in the capital of the state). The city is also a place to live. The original plan of Brasília included the distribution of individual parts of the city – housing units were located along the twelve-kilometer axis of the “wings” (*Aixo Rodoviário*). Both the northern and southern parts of the axis have a similar layout – the core is made of three independent roads. Along this axis, there are two frontage alignments on both sides; a total of 120 such “quarters” were planned. Each of them is separated from the neighbouring one by transverse streets along which commercial and service buildings are located.¹²

Both in terms of architecture and urban planning, this composition is still clear and it seems that it is still fulfilling its role. With regard to contemporary housing developments, especially in Poland, residents can envy the spaciousness and greenery filling urban interiors. On the other hand, the biggest problem is cars that are parked everywhere, which gives an impression that Brasília’s design assumes that they are to be constantly in motion. Of course, the problem of parking spaces is characteristic of a number of cities around the world, which is due to the rapid and unpredictable increase in the number of cars. The space provided for greenery and recreation has become the space for the automotive industry. But as far as it seems unsolvable in historical, cramped cities of old Europe, in the case of Brasília – it is unusual considering that *Eixo Monumental* has 12 car lanes (in both directions in total) and *Eixo Rodoviário* – 14.

When characterizing architecture, Oscar Niemeyer once wrote:

The complexity of goals – characteristic of architecture – introduces a rigor alien to the so-called pure art. But you cannot make a rule out of free randomness. Thus, the beauty of architecture resulting from the organic unification and unification of goals is closer to the objective truth about the beauty of form, giving it the value of all (mental and physical) usefulness [...]. I am convinced that a real work of architecture should, above all, present beauty in the expressiveness of forms.¹³

⁹ S. Latour, A. Szymiski, *Rozwój współczesnej myśli architektonicznej*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1985, p. 448.

¹⁰ The dome was formed by 16 reinforced concrete ribs in the form of asymmetrical arcs placed on a circular plan with a diameter of 71 meters. The space of the cathedral was placed underground, and the “crown of thorns” of 40 meters rises above the level.

¹¹ As cited in *ibidem*, p. 460.

¹² A more detailed analysis of Brasília’s superquadras is presented in: M. Skaza, *Trzy miasta i dwanaście przypadków architektury. uwagi o architekturze współczesnej Brazylii w kontekście uwarunkowań kulturowych* [in:] M. Skaza, M. Twardowski, *Brazylia. Perspektywy*, Politechnika Krakowska, Kraków 2019, pp. 32–40.

¹³ As cited in S. Latour, A. Szymiski, *op. cit.*, p. 444.

These words best reflect the character of the architecture that builds the space of Brasília. These architectural icons, arranged according to a certain principle in the city's urban layout, become hallmarks, a spectacular beginning and end. The views shown in the photos of such photographers as Lucien Clergue, René Burri or Julius Shulman are sophisticated, tasteful, epic. They confirm that these buildings are not only photogenic, but first of all – spectacular. These icons of architecture are at the same time the greatest advantage of Brasília, but in their isolation, they also show the greatest disadvantage of this city – they seem to be exhibits in an open-air museum of modernity.

4. PEOPLE

As Jan Gehl claims – and it is hard to disagree with such an assumption – cities should exist for people. In the case of Brasília, its resident was thought of as a modern man. Working, living, moving everywhere by car, and not – as is the case in old towns – on foot. Perhaps Charles Mulford Robinson's words could best describe the imaginary inhabitants of the new capital: "Happy people ... will grow in love to it and pride in it. They will be better citizens, more aware, more creative and filled with civic pride."¹⁴ Just as the new capital of Brazil was to be a dream city, this modern man living in this space was to be just as imaginary. Wojciech Kosiński, however, points out to

the drastically different hierarchy of importance between the space for people – poor, substandard and uninteresting, and the space for the authorities – super-expensive, rich and spectacular, it truly resembles the Chandigarh case. It is associated with the colonial mentality, neglect and contempt for 'ordinary people.'¹⁵

Built from scratch, Brasília was a vision of the city of the future, but also a large-scale experiment. Today it is a structure that has existed for over half a century and its image may stimulate reflection on the shape of future cities. The Brazilians themselves tend to call their capital a fantastic island (*ilha da fantasia*). The city is criticized for being built against human, economic and environmental needs. Initially designed for 500,000 people, today it has the population of almost 3 million. You can notice the uncontrolled urban sprawl and suburbanization, which is also characteristic of a number of cities around the world.

Conceived as future-proof, Brasília is a city for cars, not for people. Wide streets or alleys cut off individual parts of the city, and the inhabitants of each of the superquadras are isolated from the neighborhood. And yet – people live there, they function, work, and the city lasts. Because the city lives as long as people live in it.

5. SUMMARY

The idea behind the creation of the new capital of Brazil was the desire to create a new beginning on the basis of which a modern country would be built. Nevertheless, the project

¹⁴ As cited in W. Graham, *Miasta wyśnione. Siedem wizji urbanistycznych, które kształtują nasz świat*, Karakter, Kraków 2016, p. 55.

¹⁵ W. Kosiński, *Miasto i piękno miasta*, Wydawnictwo PK, Kraków 2011, p. 113.

is considered a failure. Stanisław Latour and Adam Szymiski describe the construction of this city as a “testing ground,” both in relation to Lúcio Costa’s urban planning and the sculptural forms of architecture proposed by Oscar Niemeyer¹⁶. Wojciech Kosiński goes even a step further and unambiguously emphasizes: “Over-ambitious president Kubitschek has designated it in an imaginary, insufficiently thought-out, insufficiently analysed place, in the heart of the Amazon jungle, detached from the oecumene.”¹⁷ Perhaps the most radical in this narrative of criticism is the voice of Professor Ricky Burdett, who argues that the problem with this city is not whether it is good or bad, but that it is not a city.¹⁸

In the sense in which the myths of architecture may appear to the recipient as knowledge that is recognized and transmitted, and not mathematically calculated and statistically recorded in numbers, Brasília remains in the sphere of these myths. It appears to us in the form of afterimages – shots of iconic architecture detached from its place. The cathedral, the “opposing” domes of the Congress, or government buildings delimiting the space of the Plaza of the Three Powers – these are the images that appear in the memory of a person who builds a certain image of the place. It is rather an image than a memory.

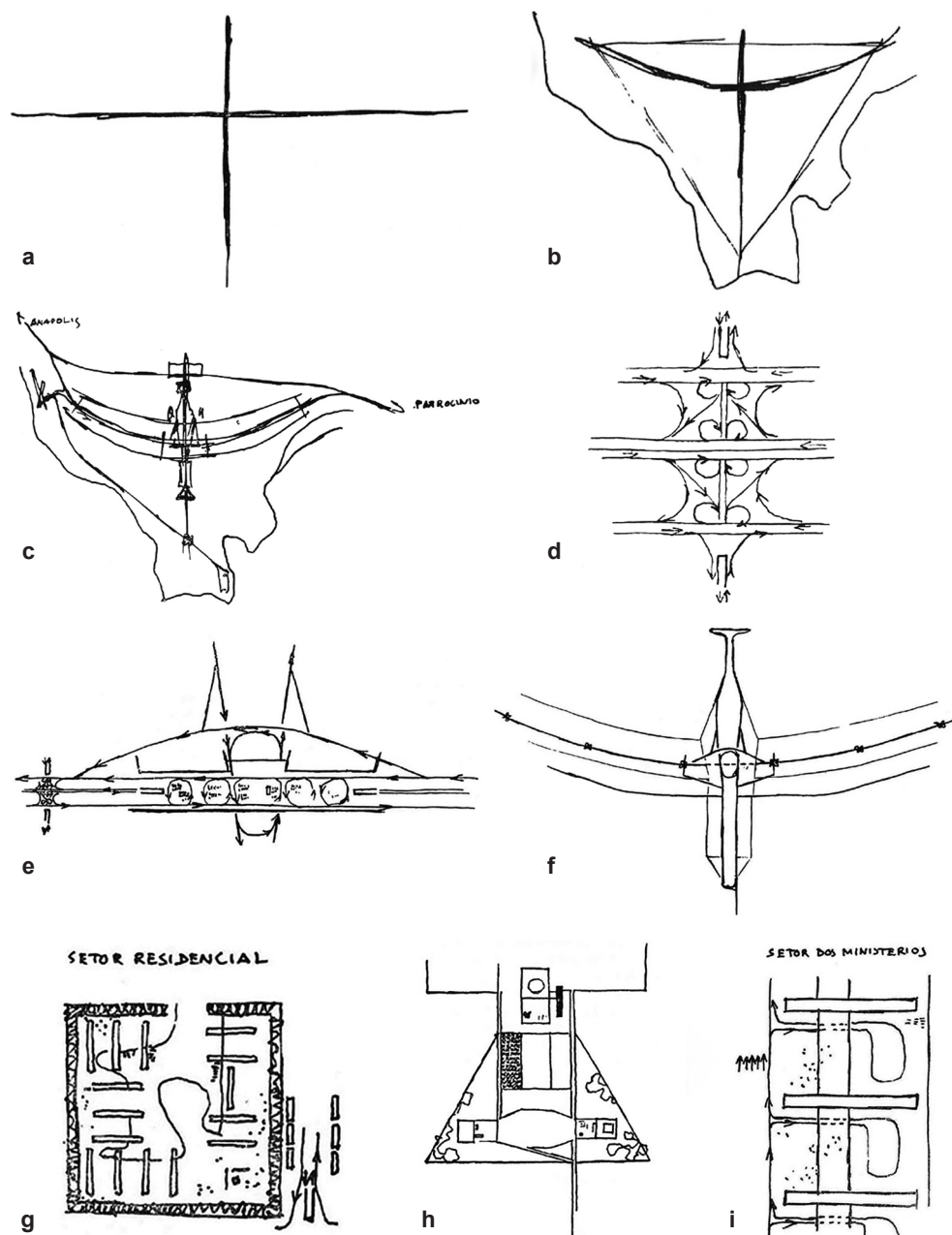
However, it should be noted – regardless of the conclusions quoted above – that Brasília is a beautiful myth, a dream about modern architecture, about modern society living among this architecture. Perhaps, taking Niemeyer’s advice, it will take another 200 years,¹⁹ to see if it’s a myth or the truth!

¹⁶ S. Latour, A. Szymiski, *op. cit.*, p. 445.

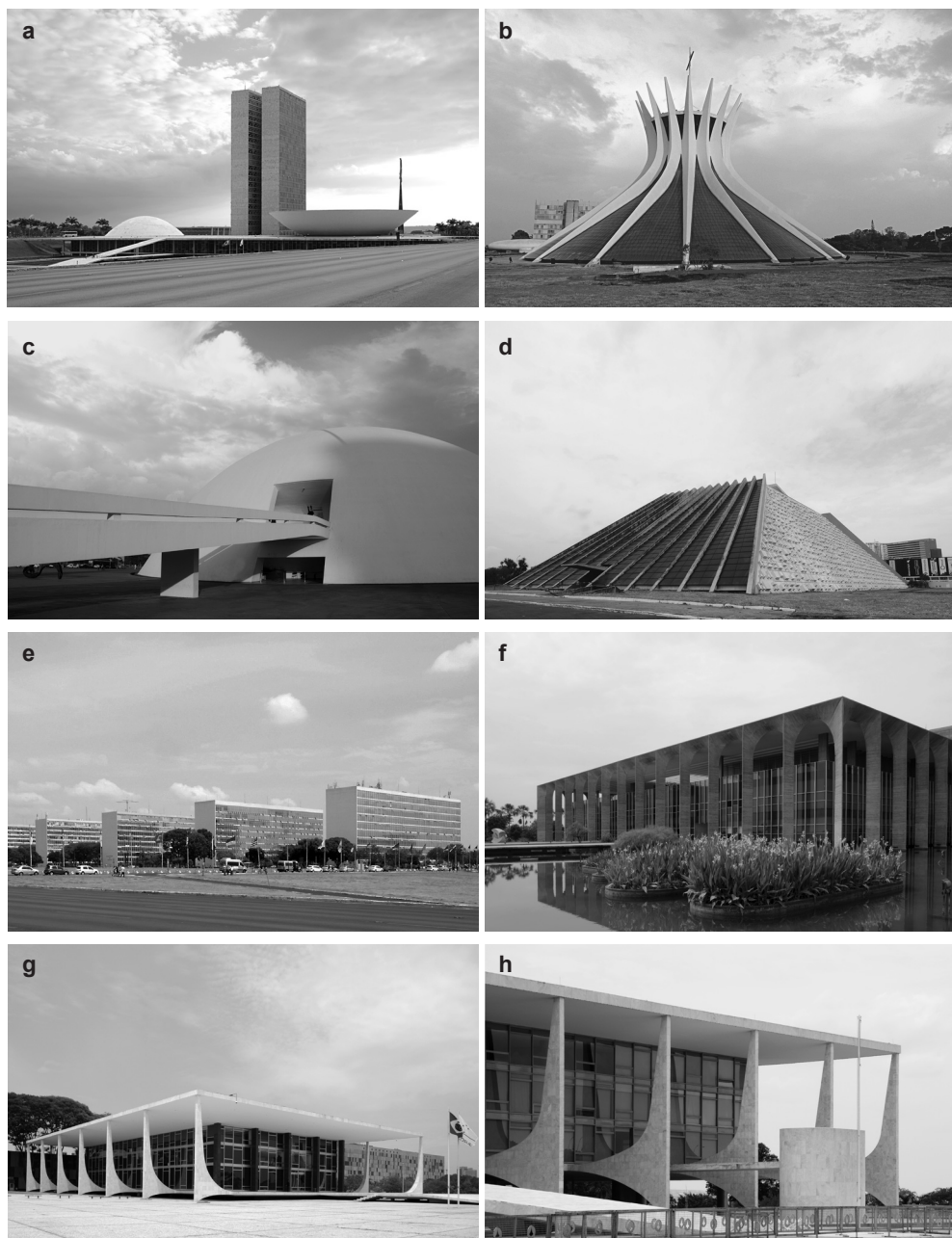
¹⁷ W. Kosiński, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ *Brasília: A critical analysis* [in:] Theory of Settlements, <https://theoryofsettlements.wordpress.com/2016/02/15/brasilia-a-critical-analysis/> (access: 16.04.2021).

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.



III. 1. Concept sketches of Lucio Costa: a, b, c – from sign to shape, d – collision-free junctions near Eixo Rodoviário, e – the area of the crossing of the axes, f – transport structure, g – superquadras, h – the Three Powers Square, i – ministerial sector (on the basis of drawings of Lucio Costa included in: *Relatório do plano piloto de Brasília*, ed. A.E. da Costa, Brasília 1991).



Ill. 2. Icons of architecture of Brasília: a – the National Congress, b – Cathedral of Brasília, c – museum, d – theatre, e – ministerial sector, f – Ministry of Foreign Affairs, g – the Supreme Federal Court, h – Planalto Palace (presidential palace) (phot. M. Skaza, 29.10.2017).

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