Guest Editorial

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This issue of *URBAN DESIGN International* is but a modest attempt to showcase some of the urban design-related research and work that have been flourishing in Brazil in recent years. To understand the difficulty of this task one should note the size, complexity and cultural diversity of Brazil. Covering 8.5 millionsq km, it is the world's fifth largest country with over 80 per cent of its 186 million inhabitants residing in urban areas. There are 5560 municipalities where at least one settlement is officially classified as a 'city', 26 cities with more than 200 000 residents and 12 with more than 1 million. São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro are now megacities with populations of 20 and 12 million, respectively.

Brazil is well known for its heroic modernism that conquered the hearts of both critics and public from the 1940s until the inauguration of its new capital in 1960, only 4 years after inception. Although Brasilia is criticized for its monumentality and lack of urbanity, it is the world's only modernist city, its elegant design injects a 'Brazilian flavor' into Corbu's visions, and the city performs well its symbolic and regional development roles. Other Brazilian modernist projects – particularly the works of Niemeyer, Costa, Marx, Reidy to name only a few – left undeniable marks in the history of architecture and urban design. But from the 1960s, because of a number of reasons, including the increasing unpopularity of modernism and the implications of Brazil's military regime, Brazilian architecture and urbanism fell from the radar of the international media (Andreoli and Forti, 2004). After the return to democracy in the mid-1980s and particularly during the past 5 years, there has been a rebirth of international interest on Brazil's successful political and economic stories, along with an awareness of its enormous development potentials.

Brazil has still to overcome being one of the world's leaders in socio-economic disparities. Long-standing social and political processes have generated cities of fragmented territories with deep social and spatial divisions, which are worsened by new models imposed by globalization (Fernandes and Valença, 2001). For instance,

although between 2000 and 2010 the country's population living in *favelas* (squatter settlements) decreased by 16 per cent, almost one-third of the country's population – 54.6 million people – still live in such conditions (UN-Habitat, 2010). In the cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro they count for over 10 and 20 per cent of their populations. However, evidence points to a new country in the making with undeniable advances in political representation, governance, social programs and income distribution.

In our discipline, the renewed interest in Brazil comes not only from cases such as Curitiba's sustainability initiatives and Porto Alegre's participatory budget, but also from the implications and the potential of the 1988 National Constitution and the 2001 Statute of the City. These unique and progressive legal instruments recognize the social function of cities and aim at making them more inclusive and equitable; they have opened new venues for urban policies, community participation, planning and development control (Fernandes, 2007). All over the country there are numerous examples of cutting edge research, programs and projects in planning and urban design, which help to construct better cities and urban spaces. This ground has been covered more extensively in a recently published comprehensive assessment of contemporary urbanism in Brazil (del Rio and Siembieda, 2009).

Through the current issue, *UDI* wishes to contribute a little further to filling the information gap about Brazilian urban design, an idea born from a conversation with Ivor Samuels (Oxford Brookes University) during the 2007 International Seminar on Urban Form in Ouro Preto, Brazil's most famous colonial town. The papers selected for this issue represent well the current research and work on urban design in Brazil.

Is there a Brazilian city? To answer this question Medeiros and Holanda discuss their extensive study comparing 44 Brazilian cities to 120 cities worldwide. On the basis of space syntax and using GIS tools, they considered the variables of form and distribution, density and compactness, topology, and zoning/centralities. They found that the typical Brazilian city is comparable to

European and Asian settlements but is more socially segregated, badly articulated, less synergistic and intelligible: it is a fragmented space and its labyrinthine structure derives from a patchwork development pattern, the exception being the historical core that they call the 'oasis in the labyrinth'. One of such typical Brazilian cities is Marabá, which Ana Cardoso uses as a case study to discuss urban design in the Amazon region. From the transfer of the original settlement out of the seasonal flood zone to a modernist 'new city' to the recent riverfront redevelopment following the international model, Cardoso exposes the constant mismatch among the three different levels of government and how it impacts urban design and affects the most deprived populations.

One of the fundamental social roles of universities and their architecture schools is servicing communities in need, as shown by the Public Architecture Program at the Federal University of Minas Gerais' School of Architecture. Pereira, Maciel and Campos discuss the involvement of faculty and students in this program and their project to upgrade a squatter settlement in Barbacena, in collaboration with this city's planning department. The design process had profound pedagogical implications and strong repercussions for the community: it identified buildings and areas at risk, removed families to new houses, redesigned streets and created new parks including a gateway to the community. The work in *favelas* is also addressed by Lara who discusses the implications of the participatory budget model in projects for illegal settlements in the city of Belo Horizonte. He notes the importance and effectiveness of this model as opposed

to more centralized approaches, and advocates it as a new form of urban governance with enormous repercussions for ameliorating the quality of life of the most needy and in advancing a really sustainable urbanism.

I sincerely hope that these articles will contribute to the readers' awareness that beyond Brasília, *bossa nova* and soccer, Brazil has a lot to show. Recent political, social and cultural developments, and many bright minds and designers provide a framework for important research, pedagogical experiences and projects that are helping to create better places and can contribute immensely to the state of the art in urban design.

References

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