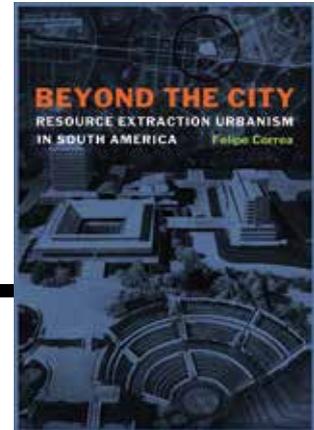


THE TAKING PLACES

BEYOND THE CITY: RESOURCE EXTRACTION URBANISM IN SOUTH AMERICA

BY FELIPE CORREA; AUSTIN, TEXAS: UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS PRESS, 2016; 192 PAGES, \$40.

REVIEWED BY NATE MILLINGTON



More than 50 years after its construction, Brasília carries a symbolism that grows only more complex with age. The Brazilian capital is in many ways a failed experiment, but one where iconography continues to inspire, often in unexpected ways.

It is a city out of time, built to gesture at a future that never came, and a reminder of a past that feels increasingly remote. It was an incongruous place from the start: sharp angles laid in an austere landscape, a city constructed out of thin air. Images of Brasília's construction, such as those by the French-Brazilian photographer Marcel Gautherot, highlight its newness, the strange relationship between monumentality and futurist impulse. These images juxtapose the city's abstract forms with the low-tech mechanics of their construction, calling attention to the thousands of workers who journeyed from distant parts of the country to share in the dream of modernity. These workers were a reminder that the utopian impulse would not easily be realized. Indeed, the inability to include in the project early construction workers, many of whom would populate the largely unplanned satellite cities that soon ringed Brasília's urban core, was one of the first indications that the project was flawed. Does the complicated legacy of Brasília mean that the project of architectural utopia was a mirage?

In his new book, *Beyond the City: Resource Extraction Urbanism in South America*, Felipe Correa, an associate professor of urban design at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, considers the productive landscapes that mark South America's interior. The

questions that Brasília raises loom over the text. What lessons should architects and designers take from the attempts at city building that mark much of 20th-century urban thought, especially in the global south? And what can architects and designers contribute to the proliferation of unplanned urbanization throughout South America's expanding resource frontier?

Correa's starting point for these questions is the Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America (IIRSA), an ambitious plan for continent-level coordination of infrastructure. Established in 2000 by the former Brazilian president Fernando Henrique Cardoso, IIRSA is "the most aggressive transcontinental integration project ever planned for South America." For Correa, the project's focus on transportation infrastructure "is having a catalytic effect on the already colossal processes of resource extraction ubiquitous to the region, further compounding controversial patterns of urbanization and rapidly accelerating the unregulated urban development of vast regions outside of the larger metropolitan areas." Correa situates IIRSA within longer histories of state-led attempts to develop the continent's extractive frontier throughout the 20th century, attempts that often fused the need for raw materials with broader, mythic articulations about national identity and modernity.

Many of these earlier projects featured extensive involvement of architects and designers, who saw urban design as a means of generating social progress. The book subsequently focuses on a series of experimental city-building projects in the 20th

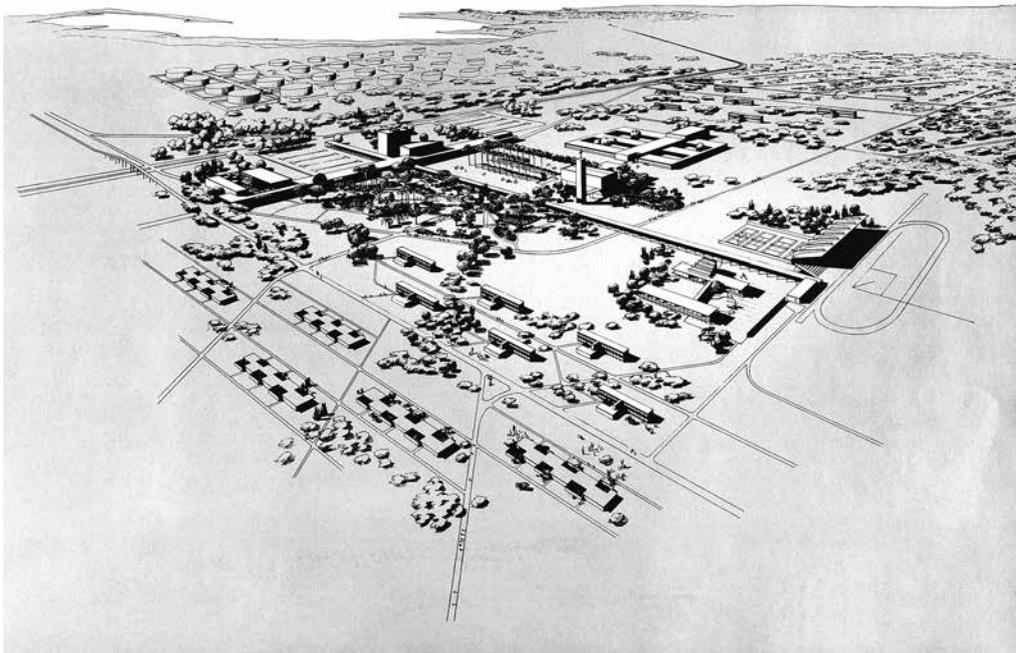


ABOVE
Plan of Belo Horizonte drawn by Aarão Reis in 1895.

century, brought together under the term “Resource Extraction Urbanism.” This term initially brought to my mind the growing forest cities of the Amazon or the peri-urban landscapes of cattle production that link together much of the continent, though Correa’s usage of the term is more particular. He focuses specifically on experimental city-building initiatives that attempted to bring urban design expertise to the resource frontier throughout the century. These were attempts to use urban design in the service of social improvement or profit maximization, and they were by definition negotiations with site-specific realities. As he notes, “With their successes and failures, the projects assembled under the rubric of resource extraction urbanism mark a series of concerted efforts to synthesize ideal urban visions with the gradual incorporation of local practical knowledge.” The projects that Correa highlights are designed to situate specific design projects within their broader territorial, political, and economic contexts, but they are linked together by an enduring interest in the ability of design to yield better social outcomes. What ties them together is an interest in the “city...as a critical site for experimentation and social improvement.” Correa finds inspiration in these projects, seeing them as flawed but nevertheless compelling interventions into the South American resource frontier.

The book focuses on the period from the late 19th to the mid-20th century, with broadly chronological case studies drawn from Chile, Brazil, and Venezuela that move from early attempts at city building on behalf of regional elites in the late 1800s to more recent attempts. Although they are diverse, ranging from “provisional encampments to regional capitals,” the projects Correa engages with are chosen for their ability to “encapsulate the affinities between nation building, design aspirations, and transnational expertise that gave shape to experimental urban projects in conjunction with sites of extreme resource extraction within continental South America.”

In the book’s first case study, Correa focuses on Belo Horizonte, a regional capital in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais. There in the final decade of the 19th century, regional elites drew inspiration from Pierre Charles L’Enfant’s 1791 plan for Washington, D.C., and developed a designed city that would serve as inspiration for the regional capitals of Goiânia and Brasília in later years. Belo Horizonte puts in place many of the themes that characterize the remainder of the book: the contrast between formal plans and their on-the-ground application, the political machinations of both state and federal governments, a move away from the coast toward expanding resource frontiers,



ABOVE
Bird's-eye perspective of Venezuela's Creole Petroleum town (Judibana) proposed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1946.

and the complex politics of modernity in 20th-century South America. To Correa, Belo Horizonte is a flawed yet ultimately successful model of urban experimentation, in which an adaptable grid allowed for the development of a spatially diverse urban landscape capable of absorbing many functions.

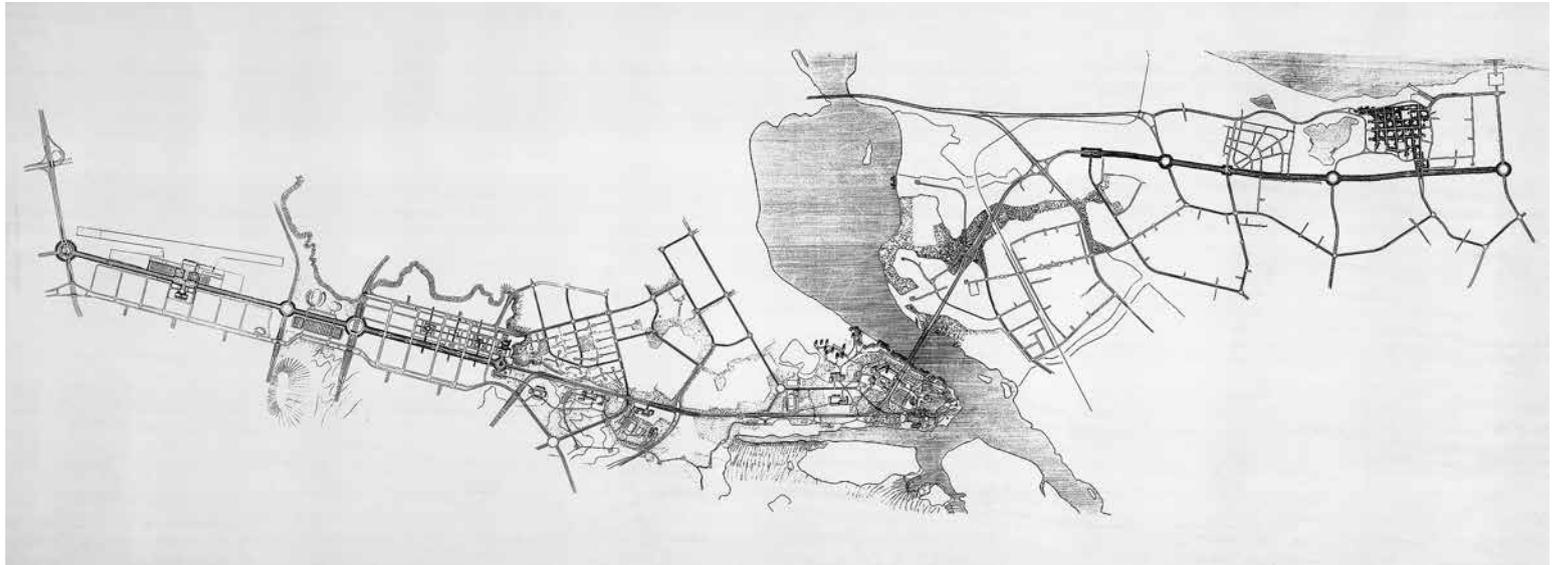
In the second chapter, Correa details the creation of an expansive network of resource extraction in Northern Chile. There, in order to harvest caliche, a rock used in the production of sodium nitrate, the Chilean state created a network of mining and processing centers throughout the Atacama Desert. The production of caliche created more than just a landscape of scattered mining settlements. It was a means of urbanizing the desert and developing centers of both economic and social reproduction in an inhospitable locale. Correa regards these examples of radical experiments in industrial town planning as “provisional utopias,” attempts to bring urban life to a landscape deemed unsuitable. As with Belo Horizonte, the cities of the Atacama are seen as successful in their ability to merge gridded structure with flexibility, yielding a charismatic landscape that Correa hopes will generate tourism as the region's economy shifts. By considering the Atacama as not just a place of resource extraction but also an urbanized region in its own right, Cor-

rea inverts long-standing dynamics of core and periphery to instead consider the flow of urban ideas between regions. Here, I was reminded of the geographer Jennifer Robinson's call to study what she calls ordinary cities, the cities that structure contemporary daily life but are often excluded from

the formal urban imagination. Urbanization is a wide-ranging process that modifies landscapes in its wake, even as those landscapes lie out of view.

In the third and fourth chapters of the book, Correa focuses on attempts to bring urban design to the oil landscape of western Venezuela. He focuses primarily on Judibana, designed initially by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, and Ciudad Guayana, a midcentury collaboration between Venezuelan regional planning and design expertise courtesy of the Joint Center for Urban Studies at Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Correa contextualizes these experimental plans with the unplanned urban agglomerations that characterize oil production in Venezuela and beyond, seeing them as successful applications of design principles that allowed their respective cities to outlast the boom-and-bust dynamics of oil extraction.

The final chapter focuses on Vila Piloto and other experimental urban projects associated with hydroelectric energy generation in south-central Brazil in the second half of the 20th century. Inspired by the Tennessee Valley Authority and midcentury ideals of community development advocated by



**EXPERIMENTAL CITY-BUILDING INITIATIVES
ATTEMPTED TO BRING URBAN DESIGN
EXPERTISE TO THE RESOURCE FRONTIER.**

the French-Dominican priest Louis-Joseph Lebrét's *Économie et Humanisme* research center, Brazilian regional planners built a series of experimental settlements to house construction workers. The projects that were built—in particular the striking circular plan associated with Vila Piloto—yielded cities that embraced logics that far exceeded the production of energy, creating underlying spatial principles that could be then modified by successive residents. Through a flexible but fixed approach, these projects demonstrate “how smart design can successfully outlive singular ideologies and adapt to the shifting rhythms of urban life.” As with the other projects highlighted in the book, the apparent success of Vila Piloto lies in its ability to combine designed structure with flexibility.

Correa's book is concerned with the relationship between form and improvisation. A similar interest animates the 2014 Brazilian film *Branco Sai, Preto Fica* [*White Out, Black In*], a low-budget science fiction film directed by Adirley Queirós. In the film, Queirós draws specifically on Brasília's bifurcated landscape of center and periphery to tell a futuristic story that centers on the enduring wounds of racial violence and segregation. The film ricochets between documentary and science fiction, and centers on two characters who were disabled by present-day police violence. That the director uses Brasília as a landscape for science fiction is not surprising, but what is of interest is the

degree to which Queirós completely ignores Oscar Niemeyer's Pilot Plan, the visually arresting core of Brasília, and opts instead to film entirely in the city's periphery, the satellite cities that were not part of the original urban design. In that landscape of rusted things, abandoned public spaces, and creaky, low-tech machinery, Queirós plays with the legacy of Brasília and the broader politics of the future that materialize there. It is only at the very end that the Brasília we know appears, engulfed in fiery explosions, the revenge of those left out of the city's experiment.

Queirós's film is a provocation that purposefully dismantles the utopian project of Brasília. When juxtaposed with the formal plans forming the foundation of *Beyond the City*, the film suggests the stories that exist at the margins of these projects, the complicated relationships between plan and lived experience that mark attempts to urbanize unruly landscapes. South America's extractive frontiers are often predicated on logics of violence, inequality, and land grabbing, and histories of colonialism and dispossession are deeply felt in present processes of urbanization. These are missing from the utopian visions and aspirations that mark Correa's projects. Here, Greg Grandin's *Fordlandia*, with its descriptions of the Amazon's slow overtaking of Henry Ford's famously doomed rubber city, is a welcome corollary to *Beyond the City*. But so too would be the voices of those who inhabit and make lives in the cities Correa describes. What might they have to say about the cities in which they live? ●

NATE MILLINGTON IS A PHD CANDIDATE IN GEOGRAPHY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY.

ABOVE
Schematic city plan for Ciudad Guayana developed by the Joint Center for Urban Studies in the early 1960s.

COURTESY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, FRANCES LOEB LIBRARY AT THE HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF DESIGN