James Holston Generative Copies: Modernist Architecture and Urbanism in Brazil



am an anthropologist investigating architecture. I also trained professionally as an architect. Let me begin by suggesting how these studies intersect in this essay. Both anthropology and architecture may be practiced as investigations of the present, but of different sorts. Anthropology's practice is a combination of ethnographic, comparative, and historical methods designed to detect both the structures and the contingencies that render the present inhabitable. In addition to detection, however, it's aim is to problematize this inhabitation. It does so by focusing on its assumptions and contradictions, as evident in what people say and do and primarily in the gaps between the two. The kind of anthropology I am talking about construes these foci as starting points - problems, puzzles, "crimes" - for an investigation of three trajectories. One traces these foci through their genealogies of historical transformation to show how they structure the present as an insurgence of the past. The other emphasizes that this historical structuring is typically lived as a taken-for-granted because it generally arrives in the present, so to speak, unannounced and unproblematized.

The third investigates the consequences of this unproblematization. It shows that the organizations of life in the present are culturally robust as historical taken-for-granteds. But in studying the conflicts of daily life, this aspect of anthropology's investigation also shows that the taken-for-granteds of the present are fragile because their organizations are produced at the intersection of many historical formulations that are themselves often in conflict. These intersections create the contingencies of the present that become the idioms of conflicts and that anthropological research makes visible. The sum of these three anthropological investigations defamiliarizes the way people live. This defamiliarization is anthropology's critical objective. It renders the present strange and indicates its emergent conditions of change.

Architecture is also an investigation of the inhabitation of the present. But unlike anthropology, it generally strives to become normative, predictive, and prescriptive of the present, shaping it, stone by stone, plan by plan, becoming the structure of the present. It is, moreover, a structuring based on a prior script that becomes imposed on the present as two dimensional plans take on three dimensional form. In this process, architecture is necessarily utopian. Whoever designed a family house for divorce, for even the possibility of divorce? As normative structure and script, however, a decisive problem in architecture is to deal with the inevitable contingencies of living, with the multiple forces and factors that are always unmaking and remaking our lives in the present we inhabit. The "heavy" structures of architecture - especially the fetishized objects of modernist architecture, as I argue in this essay - accompany such changes with difficulty. Instead, the contingencies of living often render architecture isolated, anachronistic, even oppressive.

I believe that anthropology, as an investigation of the present, has important things to say to architecture about this problem. In what



1. Model of the Ministry of Education and Culture in Rio de Janeiro, 1937. (a) UCB AVRL)



 Brasília, view (back to front): Lake, Esplanade of the Ministries, Cultural Sectors (with Cathedral), Public Service and State Enterprise Sectors, Residential Sectors, and Banking Sectors, 1981

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