



BRASILIA: LIVABLE, DRIVABLE CITY

FAST FACTS	Brasilia	Similar To
Metropolitan Population	2,950,000	Melbourne, Cleveland, Naples
Urbanized Area* Population	625,000	Rotterdam, Omaha, Winnipeg, Shizuoka
Urbanized Land Area: Square Miles	115	Sendai, Liverpool, Boise, Victoria
Urbanized Land Area: Square Kilometers	298	
Population per Square Mile	5,400	New York, Winnipeg, Wellington
Population per Square Kilometer	2,100	
National capital Located in Distrito Federal (Federal District, similar to DF in Mexico or DC in the United States) 8 th largest metropolitan area in Brazil		
*Continuously built up area		

Much of the world seems to believe that Brasilia, the less than 50-year-old planned capital city of Brazil, was hewn out of the rain forest. While its location was remote 50 years ago, the city sits far from the rain forest in rolling hills reminiscent of the Texas hill country, or the Barossa Valley, east of Adelaide.

Brasilia was on my itinerary only out of obligation --- one could hardly review Brazilian urbanization without visiting the nation's planned capital city. Its reputation is not good --- a 1960's design employing the tiring international architectural style, the nadir of architecture until the recent reversals typified by the Bilbao Guggenheim, the Lloyds of London Building and the Disney Center in Los Angeles.

I could not have been more wrong. "Plano Piloto," the planned core of Brasilia is a delightful mixture of generally low-rise apartment buildings and open space that mercifully camouflage the architectural style that would offend elsewhere. Plano Piloto is so called because it is shaped, liberally speaking, in the form of an airplane. The federal government buildings, other public buildings and central business district form the fuselage ("Eixo Monumental" is the eight or more lane boulevard through the area, with plenty of room for expansion). Then there are two wings, Asa Norte (north) and Asa Sul (south) where apartments and local businesses are located. Plano Piloto is not large. It is home to less than 200,000 people. The wings are approximately 1.5 miles wide, and the boulevard through the middle is approximately 10 miles long.

Brasilia may be the only city designed for the world as it exists in the 21st century. Indeed, Brasilia may be the first city in the world designed for how people want to live instead of how planners want them to. Here, peace was long ago made with the automobile. Plano Piloto has wide boulevards. Through the core of the wings is a six-lane boulevard, completely grade separated, with no traffic signals (Eixo Rodoviario). On each side is another boulevard of four lanes, also grade separated with traffic signals only in the core. The grade separation is tasteful, modest in scale and even instinctual. There are none of the skyscraping flyovers found on

American and European freeways. Turns are always the same --- right turns are on single lane ramps before the interchange and left turns are always after. This also makes possible frequent “retournos” (grade separated U-turns) when one has overshot the mark, which is not difficult with Brasilia’s unconventional address system (this is not criticism, the system is just unconventional). There are also wide boulevards on the east and west margin of the wings and what might be characterized as a western beltway, which serves as the main intercity route between far away Forteleza and Goiania. Throughout the other planned communities of the Distrito Federal, there are also wide roadways and plenty of room in the rights of way to expand, even in the core Plano Piloto.

At many of the major cross streets are small neighborhood shopping areas, perhaps one block on either side of the street. This does not, however, obviate the need for that ultimate in pedestrian oriented development, the enclosed shopping mall. The core has two that would be the envy of many European, American and Japanese cities. What appears to be the largest, Park Shopping, is west of the city center, on what might be called the western belt route or ring road. Strangely, with a core city oriented north and south, the “world-class-city” required Metro system is oriented east and west, with one station a long walk over the west belt freeway from the shopping center.

Brasilia is full of open space. There seem to be playing fields and parks everywhere. The planners seem to have accomplished what some might call an impossible task --- a livable, walkable, drivable city.

Brasilia also has many single family residences. The two principal sectors, adjacent to Plano Piloto are Lago Norte and Lago Sul (North Lake and South Lake). Here houses seem reminiscent of the best neighborhoods of the same vintage overlooking the Pacific Ocean in Orange County (California).

The combination of single-family dwellings and vast expanses of open space make Brasilia anything but a dense urban area. The population density of the core urban area appears to be approximately 5,400 per square mile of land area (2,100 per square kilometer). While this is 50 percent more dense than Portland, it is at least 20 percent less dense than Los Angeles and barely one-fourth the density of Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. This core continuously built up urban area has surprisingly few people --- only 625,000 of the nearly 3,000,000 in the metropolitan area. The balance of Distrito Federal has approximately 1,400,000 people, spread widely among satellite cities that exhibit a similar planning style. However, in most of these areas, residential construction looks modest, if not decrepit to eyes used to America, Europe or Japan (see photograph of Cruziero). Then there are the unplanned suburbs and favelas in the neighboring states of Goias and Minas Gerais, more than 30 miles from Plano Piloto. Brasilia is not only capital of Brazil, but it is also capital of “leap frog development,” the term of derision coined by those who would have us all live next to and on top of one-another.

Cul-de-sacs abound both in Plano Piloto and the Lake districts. Most apartment buildings are accessible by car only through the equivalent of cul-de-sacs and virtually all of the buildings have an open parking deck on the first floor. In the single-family residential neighborhoods, the cul-de-sacs ease the provision of security.

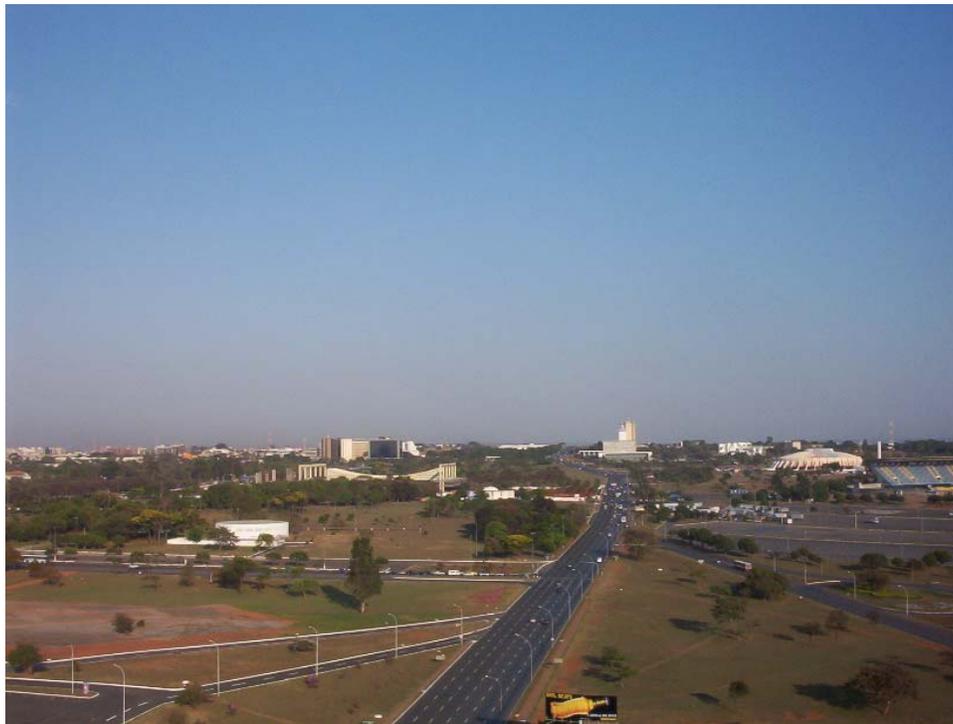
The design of the core, and the development of the satellites has resulted in what appears to be only modest traffic congestion. Perhaps the most significant flaw in the design was adoption of the early 20th century concept that government and commercial development should be

centralized. If employment had been more dispersed, Brasilia's congestion would have been dispersed. Still, traffic congestion is light by world standards

It was necessary, in the beginning, to entice federal government workers to Brasilia from Rio de Janeiro with financial incentives. But many federal employees today would live nowhere else, including many who came from Brazil's beautiful former capital, Rio de Janeiro. Certainly, with 3,000,000 residents where there were none half a century ago, enticing people to Brasilia no longer seems to be a problem.

But, as noted above, the core is surrounded by the much less attractive residential development so characteristic of Brazilian cities. Nonetheless, there is much to be admired here. Brasilia is what the future could be. And Brasilia shows that it works.

Wendell Cox
24 September 2003



Eixo Monumental: North from Centro



Principal Centro Road Junction



Apartments, Parking & Green Space



Single Family Residences: Lago Sur



Single Family Residences: Cruziero (Inside West Beltway)

Return: www.demographia.com/rac-ix.htm

Home: www.demographia.com