

# Cultural Center 508 Conservation

## The Soul of Neighbourhood Unit

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## Abstract

Part of the first Neighbourhood Unit raised in Brasilia, the Cultural Centre 508 is a building with a significant role in the cultural and social context in the Federal Capital. It was the cradle of several generations of artists, writers, actors and so many others creative professionals, contributing largely for the development of our cultural identity.

Beyond this, its historical importance is equally great, demonstrated, among others reasons, by its insertion on the scenario of the construction of the city. This paper looks for contribute to the conditions for the development of a project of Recovery and conservation of the Cultural Centre 508.



Figure 1: Façade W-2 ( Eastern entrance of Cultural Center 508)

## Introduction

The Cultural Centre 508 is a reference learning center, playing a important role on cultural research and information diffusion in Brasília.

Located among four large public schools, emphasizes experimental projects, aiming to improve reflection and critic attitude, as a mean to promote a modern cultural production, based upon human values and

social concerns. Thus, a diversified program of artistic/ cultural activities, provided free access to information acquirement and learning processes to all segments of community.

Essentially connected to the socio-politics contexts along the city's history, the educational programs developed in this Cultural Center, made possible the growth of many artistic and intellectual projects, representing a relevant contribution towards construction of Brasilia's cultural identity.

Placed in an strategic portion of a very particular surrounding area -- the first Neighbourhood Unit built at the new Capital -- we need to review some of the leading guidelines of the Neighborhood Unit concept, and premise of Lucio Costa's Urbanistic Plan, to better comprehend the meaning of this building to the local cultural heritage.

*The 508's Cultural Space* represents an important reference for most of the several sectors of creative arts, as for the main artists that grew up together with the city.

Therefore, besides its cultural and educational inherent values, its social role represents an undeniable contribution for the development of a local identity, through its humanistic and emotional standards, clearly shown in the tender expression used by Dimer Monteiro<sup>1</sup> to describe it "*the soul of the city*", or more affectively, as "*the heart*" of Brasília:

*"The soul of the city was born there. There were the small church, the day school, the cinema club movie house, the elementary schools, the square called April 21 and the Alliance Française language school. Any sort of cultural activity and political manifest took place there. And this was something spontaneous, it wasn't planned to happen that way. There were other places around being built but it really started happening there. I've been here since 59, that is before the city's launch and that place was my lab." (in Alves, 2000, p.21).<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Dimer Monteiro is a professional actor and worked as a Scenic Arts teacher at the Pré Universitário, a preparatory school which played an important role for the development of to the educational system of Brasília

<sup>2</sup> "A alma da cidade começou ali. Tinha a igrejinha, a escola parque, o teatro do clube de cinema, o cine-teatro cultura, tinha as Escolas-Classe, a Praça 21 de Abril, a Aliança Francesa. Qualquer manifestação, qualquer atividade cultural ou política era ali, naquele pedaço. E isso foi uma coisa espontânea, não estava planejado pra acontecer assim. Tinha umas coisas sendo construídas, mas ali é que começou a se formar. Eu estou aqui desde 59, antes da inauguração, e ali foi meu laboratório"

## Background

### The Site

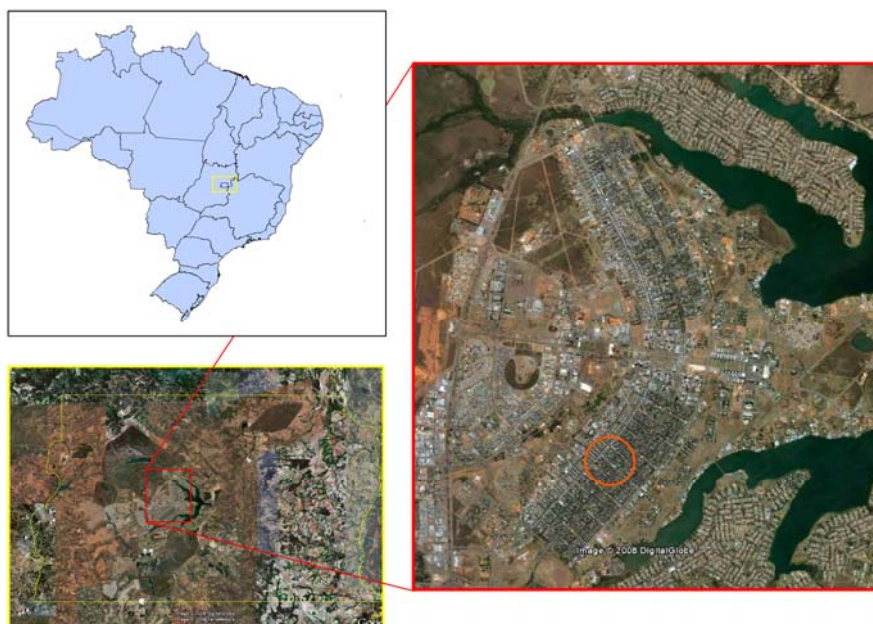


Figure 2: Situation of Brasilia in Brazil and of the Cultural Center 508 Sul in the Plano Piloto.

The Cultural Center 508 is situated on the Eastern side of the square delimited by the Superblocks named/ numbered<sup>3</sup> 107, 108, 307 e 308, constituting a residential module, called Neighbourhood Unit<sup>4</sup>.



Figure 3: Unidade de Vizinhança - Superblocks 108 /308 south (above) and 107/ 307(below).

<sup>3</sup> The Super blocks were “named” with numbers, according to the global city plan to Brasilia.

<sup>4</sup> Concept of ideal residential unit introduced by Clarence Perry, in 1929.

Accordingly to the principles introduced by Clarence Perry, in 1929, the Neighbourhood Unit was an ideal model of spatial organization, with a residential core provided with all basic services and social equipments, meant to give inhabitants the best living conditions.

Following this concept, Lucio Costa's residential units were constituted by a group of four superblocks (*Superquadras*), with their own local basic commerce and surrounded by a green belt.

The urban plan of Lúcio Costa was based on the cross of two axis, intended to organize different occupation zones and separate administrative and residential sector, creating a cross shaped urban design.

Different levels of urban scales structured the city plan: Monumental, gregarious, residential and bucolic. Along one axis (Monumental – *Eixo Monumental*) were located the administrative buildings, representing the first level. The second axis was divided by the other in two parts, called “*wings*”, because slightly curved, gives to the “*Plano Piloto*”, the shape of a plane, and was destined to the residential areas, mixing residential and bucolic scales (as the green areas were around and among the Superblocks).

The beginning of constructions along the residential axis, in opposition to the expected, did not follow a gradual order, expanding from the central area to extremities in both directions. Instead, as this first buildings were supposed to shelter government employees required to start the new Capital transference, and the parcels of land were designated to the several sectors of governmental structure, the sequence of constructions were determined by financial reasons. In other words, the departments that could afford the resources, were the first to receive the buildings.

Thus, the issue here evaluated was the first one raised in Brasília, and for these remarkable qualities e historic significance it was proposed by the Department of Culture of the Federal District, to be listed as Brasilia's protected heritage, which is now in final stage of approval procedures.

Finally, to enhance the relevance of assessment of this area, one more thing should be explained. Touched by the daring plan of Juscelino Kubistchek<sup>5</sup>, and due to the importance of the task proposed, many famous professionals joined the project -- among them Oscar Niemeyer, Athos Bulcão, Volpi, Ceschiatti and Burle Marx -- turning this site in a special exhibition space of modern artworks.

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<sup>5</sup> Juscelino Kubistchek - Brazilian president and idealizer of Brasília.

The green areas planned by Burle Marx, the most famous Brazilian landscape planner, particularly the Superblock 308 South, constitutes a unique testimony of the historic moment, with not only a historic significant value, but as representative of the modernist concepts and architectonic heritage.

### The history of the building

Being the first masonry building raised along the first commercial avenue (Av W-3), it formerly lounged public agencies and administrative government sectors. With the increase of activities, in consequence of the development of the city, these government offices had to be moved to a larger place.

Fonte: Arquivo Público do DF / Autor: sem identificação / Digitalização: Augusto Areal



Figure 4: Construction of Superblocks.

In 1973, the building started to be occupied by the Cultural Foundation of the Federal District and, in the same year, the first exhibition room was opened (Gallery A), with a retrospective of Kenzo Tange works, the Japanese architect. Following, two more exhibition spaces were opened (Galleries B and C).

During 1973 e 1974 the Cultural Foundation occupied also the mezzanine and a large shed, that later would be a Theatre.

In 1977, with the support of the artistic class and some Embassies, Wladimir Murтинho, a diplomat in charge of the Cultural Department, created an experimental art learning center, knowned at this time as *Criativity Center 508 Sul*. With a liberal educational proposal, and trying to answer to the great lack of alternatives, the Criativity Center, was an effervescent space of art production, cultural activities and experimental research.

In fact, developing a innovative program of cultural activities, it became the creative core of the Neighborhood Unit 308 South.

This intense work though, did not avoid it to be closed in 1982, for many management difficulties and economic reasons, in the political context of the years after the military coup.

In 1993, after a long period of frustrated reopening tentatives, 60% of the rooms were again opened to the public, after a long reform work, supported by a Japanese organization (Mokiti Okhada).

## The Object



Figura 5: Facade W-2 and lateral facade

The building is a brick construction with 4,533.00 m<sup>2</sup> nowadays composed by the following spaces:



Figure 6: Central area of the building



Figure 7: Main Entrance

#### Theatre rooms:

- Theatre Galpão– 350 seats
- Marco Antônio Guimarães Room – 200 seats
- Pocket Theatre – 70 seats

#### - Exhibition rooms:

- Room Rubem Valentim – Didactic work retrospectives and large group exhibitions
- Room Parangolé
- Mezzanine for small exhibitions
- Cartoon/ Modern Literature Library with a diversified collection of graphic arts
- Multiple-use Space – 180 seats
- Five workshop rooms – four of them with capacity for 20 people and one for 40 people.
- Darlan Rosa Central square - with capacity for 300 people, area for music shows, theatre plays and performances, exhibitions, literature fairs and other activities.
- Some administrative rooms and services

## Analysis

With several interruptions on its activities and being the object of a discussion between authorities about the actions that could be taken to keep functioning these capacities-building reference centre, it began to be the aim of protective measures since 1988, when it was closed for the last time.



In 1990 a large reform of the building was started based upon a complete new architectonic project, designed to provide, for the first time, the spaces to match the conceptual plan of this experimental project.

With the resources obtained though, and after three years the construction reached only a little more than the 50% of the what was intended. On September 10<sup>th</sup>, 1993 it was reopened with many of its rooms unfinished, as it remains till today.

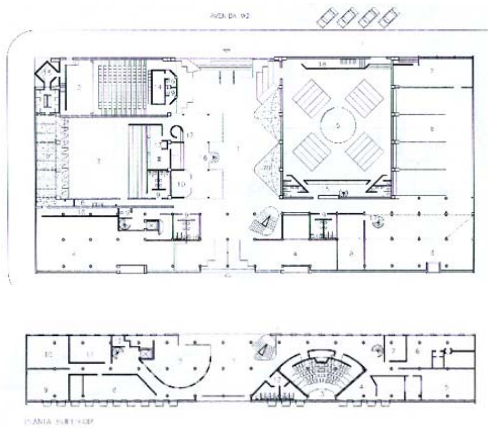


Figure 8:  
1<sup>st</sup> Floor and  
Mezzanine

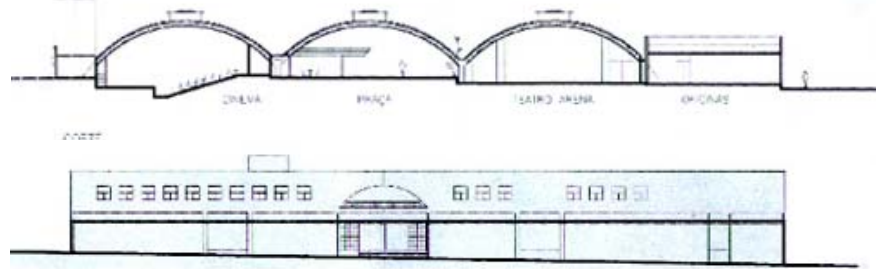


Figure 9: Section and Facade

Besides that, without a conservation plan, these reconstructed parts of the building already need repairs. The most critical adjustments to be made (and equipments to be provided) are related to:

- Restoration of the roof of the Galpão Theatre, Marco Antônio Guimarães Room Darlan Rosa Central square;
- Restoration of electric and hydraulics systems;
- Floor finishing in the Multiple-use Space;
- Installation of fire prevention systems;
- Installation of disabled facilities, including an elevator;

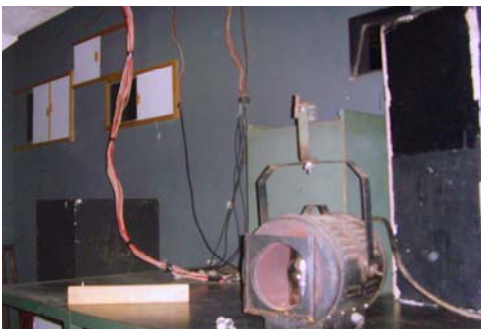


Figure 10: Light/Sound cabin



Figure 11: Leaking



- Complete recovery of Galpão Theatre and the Multiple-use Space (electric and scenic systems, sound and light cabin, bathrooms, and dressing rooms);
- Floors finishing in most of the building;
- Restoration of seats and other theatre equipment;
- External and internal painting.

### Values

As shown in the report about the building antecedents, this issue has an evident historical value, as it was one of the first buildings raised in W-3 commercial area and the first masonry one. At the first super-block constructed.

More than that, it consists in a strong factor to the construction of cultural identity as it represents an important reference for all members *Figure 9: Liking* of the cultural class, since the beginning of Brasilia's history.

Related to the role played by this institution, as previously mentioned, it must not be forgotten the emotional and affective value it has for many generations that did their first steps in arts learning in the programmes developed at this building.

All this together gives to this place a well-known cultural value that all alone, seems to me, reason enough to justify a conservation plan.

## Proposal and Method

After all that was said, I understand that to recover this cultural center, a new restoration plan should be developed in accordance to the initial conceptual project.

The essential steps to reach this goal are:

- 1 – Assessment and evaluation of the project of the last reform
- 2 – A detailed inventory of the parts of this project that were not executed.
- 3 – Assessment of the development of the conceptual and pedagogical project and its needs related to spatial organization.
- 4 – Interviews with the actual users (visitors, students and employees) and analysis of the theirs actual expectations on what refers to the physical space.

- 5 – Inventory of repairs needed.
- 6 - Development of a new restoration plan according to the researches above.
- 7 – Elaboration of a practical guide for technical use to guarantee the correct use of space, equipment and facilities.
- 8 - Development of a conservation and manage plan in order to improve the maintenance of the building spaces and equipments.

## Discussion & Conclusions

As this building belongs to the local government, the main problem to be faced will probably be of financial order. As usually happens in developing countries, culture sector is not elected as a priority goal.

The reform accomplished in 1993 received resources of a private Japanese foundation. Therefore, to make this plan concrete, it should be preceded by a fund raising effort either near to the government agencies or even with the partnership of possible private financiers.

Even being a standing reference for the Cultural Production workers, users and for the society as a whole, many efforts towards the revitalization of the place have been tried with no complete success.

To rescue the values that Cultural Center 508 (or Criativity Center as it's still called by the older attendants) represents, it's pressing to give it back to the society, but in real functioning conditions and with a good maintenance plan.

Only then, this capacity-building core could recover the former path and the respect acquired for many generations, besides the rescue of values it represents to Brasília population.

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