

MODERN URBANISM AND ARCHITECTURE IN BRAZIL: THE EMERGENCE AND GROWTH OF NEW CONCEPTS IN THE VARGAS ERA. A LOOK AT THE CAPITAL, THE CITY OF RIO DE JANEIRO

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the relationship between the emergence and growth of the concepts of modern urbanism and architecture and its achievements under the dictatorial government of Getúlio Vargas (the Vargas Era) in Brazil. The period of his government, which began with the Revolution of 1930 and lasted until 1945, was one of great political and institutional centralization. The goal of building a new nation different from the Old Republic led to broad reforms in various sectors, including public administration and urban planning.

From 1937, urban planning in Rio de Janeiro entered a new era due to the adoption of mechanisms such as the City Planning Commission. This and other centralized institutions played an important role in the process of urban transformation, mostly concentrated in the downtown area on newly available plots from the dismantling of hills and landfill resulting from it, along with the opening of a number of new arterial routes, including Presidente Vargas Avenue.

The following points are discussed:

- The official decisions at the federal level did not favor modern architecture for the construction of public buildings. Other administrative buildings were built within traditional typologies.

- The development of modern architecture from 1930 to 1945 was still undeniable, an outgrowth of the Brazilian Pavilion at the 1939 World Fair in New York, among others, explored in the book and exhibition "Brazil Builds" at the Museum of Modern Art in the same city in 1943.

We conclude that although modernism in urbanism and architecture cannot be considered the official choice of the Vargas Era, its growth in the city of Rio de Janeiro was the result of the support of certain sectors of the government, particularly the government initiative to promote construction of public buildings and urban development projects and the accession of architects to the modernist cause. Moreover, its growth resulted from symbolic reasons and benefited from centralized planning: the new urbanism and architecture conformed to the image of a revitalized nation, modern and urban.

INTRODUCTION

This article discusses the relationship between the rise and growth of the concepts of modern urbanism and architecture and their achievements under Brazilian President Getúlio Vargas's dictatorship in Brazil, the so-called "Vargas Era". We follow the diffusion of the modern architectural ideals by architects and city planners. Among them, the architect Lúcio Costa clearly stands out for his advocacy of those principles. We also focus on a few projects and achievements characteristic of the 1930-1945 period that shed light on the wealth of proposals and the circulation of ideas throughout the professional milieu. Finally, we consider the practical reasons that contributed to the growth of modern architecture and urbanism in the period, as symbolic representations of the goal of building a new Brazilian nation.

The first landmark for this period is the 1930 Revolution that brought Getúlio Vargas to power and with him the beginning of the intense political centralizing

process that was concentrated in the federal government. From that time on the stated intention of the autocratic administration was to build a new nation in contrast to the Old Republic (starting in 1889 with the proclamation of the Republic and exile of the emperor), fostered by reforming a number of areas, such as education, health, justice, finance, public administration and urban management. The end of the Vargas Era in 1945 occurred when he left power and the country held presidential elections marking the return to democracy.

After the 1930 Revolution, the trends of industrial capitalism were defined in the country. A new phase, connected to industrialization, was initiated, leading to the progressive urbanization of Brazil, in which cities became increasingly important in the general development of the nationⁱ. Thus, in a number of Brazilian cities, including Rio de Janeiro, urban renewal works were set in motion along with the adoption of the new local administrative models.

The so-called Estado Novo (New State)ⁱⁱ, which lasted from 1937 to 1945, was a particular moment within this process, as it strengthened the authoritarian tendencies present in the government since 1930, not only as a political idea as before, but also in the actions of relevant groups of the revolutionary leadership. Particularly in the city of Rio de Janeiro, however, these trends were translated into a series of urban works made possible by the close connection between the federal government and the Federal District (Rio de Janeiro) government.

All during this period, Rio de Janeiro had a distinctively political profile as the hub of national power, where mayors were nominated by the federal government, after a certain amount of political wangling. From 1930 to 1937, before the establishment of the Estado Novo regime and the consequent hardening of the dictatorial government, these appointments reflected growing political and administrative instability, which translated into the discontinuity of urban projects.

This period coincides with the diffusion of modern principles, began by Le Corbusier's visits to the country in 1929 and 1936 and of the ideas discussed in the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (Congressos Internacionais de Arquitetura Moderna - CIAM). While the leading urban planner Alfred Agache concluded his 1929 Rio de Janeiro Remodeling and Extension Plan, Le Corbusier visited the city for the first time, registering his impressions about itⁱⁱⁱ and designed a project for the building of a ribbon-shaped viaduct.

However, the next year, 1930, Le Corbusier rejected Agache's proposals^{iv} because, in his opinion they represented precisely what modern urbanism should break with. Over the next years, the gradual weakening of academic urbanism and architecture and Agache's urban design and the strengthening of modern alternatives would become clear. As a consequence of the 1930 Revolution, the Agache Plan was never put into action, but it fulfilled its role of orienting a discussion about the problems in the city of Rio de Janeiro and their possible solutions.

During the long term in office of Mayor Henrique Dodsworth (1937-1945), appointed by President Vargas, the political stability supported by the Estado Novo's power centralization was reflected in the city. In 1937, the City Planning Commission^v was recreated, modeled upon similar committees in the United States. The establishment was justified by the need to prepare a program for city development which could no longer be postponed. A number of projects were designed, though not all of them were achieved^{vi}.

MODERN PRINCIPLES WON HEARTS AND MINDS

The modern proposals pointed toward a future where all urban decisions would be taken rationally, a criterion that perfectly agreed with the Vargas Era ideals of building a new nation. This also meant solving all the society's problems, as put by Lúcio Costa,

At the time, all of us were convinced that the new architecture we were building, this new approach we were taking, was something connected with social renewal. It seemed to us that the world, the new society, and the new architecture were entwined, everything connected to each other^{vii}.

This view expressed by the architect Lúcio Costa placed architecture as an essential element for social change. It apparently was shared by the whole generation of architects who, from the last years in the 1920s and throughout the 1930s and 40s, supported the modern esthetics in Rio de Janeiro, embedded in projects like the Ministry of Education and Health building and the Cidade Universitária (University City) development.

The modernistic view was characterized by the recurrence of a set of themes. On a symbolical level, a new era was beginning^{viii} and a more just society was thus proposed, whose benefits might be broadly partaken, within the constraints imposed by capitalism. This was an ideological orientation well received during the Vargas Era. On the spatial level, it suggested a city structure quite diverse from the traditional formats, with no definition of lot limits, the separation between pedestrian and vehicle traffic, verticalization employed as a strategy for concentration of edified areas intertwined with empty spaces. It introduced an urbanism supported by the very architecture that would also be built according to its stated rational principles.

The model was that of a centralized city, the metropolis concept, opposed to that of a downtown area surrounded by suburbs. Le Corbusier (1937) in his article published in Rio de Janeiro, "The problem of the Parisian slums", sternly criticized all decentralization schemes.^{ix} He stated,

We modern urban planners think an end must be soon put to this urban disaster that is the outer neighborhoods and all those cities with unlimited extent requiring unbridled expenditures.

He was the most important translator of the CIAM-adopted ideals among local urban planners and his strong personality explains the small influence then exerted by other streams and other architects with divergent ideas.

In 1929, during Le Corbusier's first visit, not all Brazilian architects were touched by the modernistic ideals. On that first occasion, when he was really "on his way to the Plata River", quoting Lúcio Costa^x, meaning his actual targets were the cities of São Paulo, Montevideo and Buenos Aires, he gave a lecture in Rio de Janeiro. Lúcio Costa attended it, but the new ideas did not allure him much. His interest in Modernism grew a few years later, after his term (1930-1931) as chairman of the Escola de Belas Artes (School of Fine Arts), and it was fostered by his book reading instead.

Le Corbusier was back in Rio de Janeiro during 1936, this time for a longer stay of four weeks, invited by a group of Brazilian architects including Lúcio Costa, with the Minister Gustavo Capanema, one of Getúlio Vargas most trusted men. The idea was to consult Le Corbusier on the projects for the Ministry of Education and Health building and the Cidade Universitária.

Le Corbusier's principles impressed most of the audience in his 1936 lectures and from then on Brazilian architects and urban planners started backing the CIAM principles, namely the need of imposing order on the city's expansion and opening empty spaces and green areas. Two months later, Adalberto Szilard^{xi} was already employing such ideas, in the first inkling of the adherence to the new values. His designs focused on the future Presidente Vargas Avenue, for which he projected separation between motor vehicles and pedestrians, with roads on the ground level and pedestrian walkways and stores on their second floor.

The tension inherent to the few years just before World War II was reflected in the technical papers published at the time intended to disseminate the principles of modern urbanism. After the war broke out, examples from the United States dominated, while the models employed in German cities lost followers. Urbanism was then forced to present answers to the protection or reconstruction of European cities and this was reproduced by Brazilian urban planners. It was within this environment fostering the circulation of models from other countries that the modern ideas obtained their fullest diffusion.

Le Corbusier's Voisin Plan (1925) for the city of Paris was presented by J. Estelita^{xii} (1934) as a strategic example for war situations, with the abolishment of crowded downtown neighborhoods and the enlargement of empty spaces therein. Some years later, Silva^{xiii} (1942) presented his studies about the difficulties of protecting Paris against air raids, due to the overcrowding of buildings. Based upon these, he

proposed that the area near Presidente Vargas Avenue be used for tall buildings interspersed with empty spaces, according to the modernistic repertoire.

During the 1938 XI^a. Feira Internacional de Amostras [11th. International Samples Fair], the Rio de Janeiro municipal government presented its urban renewal projects prepared by the City Planning Commission during Mayor Dodsworth's term of office, among which were the opening of Presidente Vargas Avenue, the demolition of the Santo Antonio Hill and the occupation of the Esplanada do Castelo (Castelo Esplanade).

On the other hand, the new principles posed a challenge to the block occupation criteria proposed by the Agache Plan. Affonso E. Reidy^{xiv} in 1938 rejected this layout for the Esplanada do Castelo. He considered blocks filled with rectangular perimeter buildings enclosing courtyards (Figure 1 "B") to be deficient in both ventilation and illumination and instead urged an alternating indented ("rédent") building layout (Figure 1 "C") with open courtyards. In the same year, the design based on the Agache Plan was shelved by the City Planning Commission and substituted for another one that included open areas according to the new principles. By then the modernistic ideals were dominant among the municipal government's technical staff.

Hermínio de Andrade e Silva and Rosário Fusco^{xv} some years later advocated a new division of the existing city blocks in the downtown area and their use for tall buildings. They graphically set out the advantages for air circulation and increased sunlight in the modernistic designs of the new blocks, in contrast to other kinds of space use. (Figure 1)

Some of these proposals, however, envisioned an ideal city and were not suitable to the renewal of an existing city. A. Szilard^{xvi}, in a paper entitled "The Cities of Tomorrow", published in the beginning of the 1940s, restated the principles orienting the 1925 Voisin Plan for Paris, defending them from several criticisms (though he revised this position in 1950)^{xvii}. In 1940 he proposed a city with roads dedicated to vehicles only and the building of subways. J. O. Saboya Ribeiro^{xviii} (1943), in a paper entitled "Future Residential Nuclei", introduced modern residential designs, though he admitted that they could not be applied to existing "obsolete" cities.

During the late 1930s and early 1940s, some principles of modernistic urbanism - the separation of roads for vehicles from the pedestrian walkways, the concentration of tower-like buildings and no definition of lot limits - were not yet broadly applied, even in official projects, in opposition to the general acceptance of architectonic principles^{xix}.

On the other hand, despite the growing adoption of the new values, during the 1940s there were attempts to find a synthesis among the different proposals. A. Szilard^{xx} (1944) reiterated the CIAM criteria regarding the need to impose a modicum of order on existing cities but, taking into consideration Saarinen's proposals^{xxi}, advocating a rational decentralization. He adapted this model to the city of Rio de Janeiro. By that time, the CIAM criteria were beginning to be questioned, and this trend would become more pronounced after World War II.

PROJECTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE MODERN ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM

During the 1930s and 40s, some projects totally or partially adopted modernistic principles. Among these, we can highlight for their size, those for Mangue Avenue (which later came to fruition as Presidente Vargas Avenue) and Cidade Universitária. On the architectural level the importance of the design and construction of the Ministry of Education and Health building is undeniably a watershed of the modern movement and, for being a product of the Vargas Era, the result of one of the duels waged by Academism and Modernism.

The first debate involved the transformations proposed by the architect Lúcio Costa, when he was head of the Escola de Belas Artes from 1930 to 1931. The teaching of architecture and urbanism became part of the university landscape during the transition from the old tradition, represented by Academism, into the

new Modernism. It is important to highlight the symbolical character of the proposed changes, even though they did not always prevail.

The second debate refers to the public competition opened for designs for the new Ministry of Education and Health building, whose winning design, showing academic tendencies, was replaced by the modernist plan presented by a team of Brazilian architects, following the trend set by Le Corbusier. The option for the modern design was symbolic, representing the acceptance of the new: "A new nation, new times."

The construction of Presidente Vargas Avenue coincided with the consolidation of the modernistic principles, though the intent of extending the old Caminho do Aterrado (Landfill Way) to reach the bay had already been suggested since the middle of the nineteenth century, intended to connect the eastern and western sections of the city.

During the administration of Mayor Dodsworth, the design was presented^{xxii} at the 1938 XI^a. Feira Internacional de Amostras da Cidade do Rio de Janeiro (11th Rio de Janeiro City International Samples Fair), as a part of the set of road construction plans proposed by the City Planning Commission. In 1937, favorable conditions for their execution were present in the Federal District by the concentration of decision power supported by the Estado Novo regime and the joint action of the Rio de Janeiro municipal government the federal government.

That was the moment when the modern ideals began to take root, though they were still restricted to the architectural field. The graphical representations showing Presidente Vargas Avenue were still contradictory in that period (1938). Sometimes the new elements were expressed by means of a sort of gallery instead of pylons. And the buildings still kept their internal free areas typical of the Agache Plan. By another token, some representations envisioned the raising of pylons and were arranged in an indented, inverted "U", format so as to leave room for free spaces.

Presidente Vargas Avenue was opened in 1944 by President Vargas himself, as a landmark in the set of architectural achievements by the municipal government with support of the federal government.

The Cidade Universitária project became a concrete intention when the federal government decided to group in the same area the several colleges and schools that would make up the newly created Universidade do Brasil. In his second visit to Rio de Janeiro (1936), Le Corbusier dealt with this matter, which was one of the reasons for his invitation.

The year before (1935), Piacentini, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's favorite architect, had also been invited to come and study the issue, a fact that, according to Lúcio Costa^{xxiii}, had made it more difficult for Minister Capanema to ask President Vargas to invite Le Corbusier. The latter prepared a pilot study, later developed by Lúcio Costa, Reidy, and others, but it was not accepted by the Faculty Committee.

In the same year (1936), Lúcio Costa, Affonso E. Reidy and Jorge Moreira, among others, prepared a new design in which some of the criticisms made of the Le Corbusier proposal were corrected. But this was not executed either. Finally, responsibility for the project and its execution was given to the University Technical Department, under the leadership of Jorge Moreira.

The modernistic principles were included in every proposal presented after Le Corbusier's second visit: concentration/verticalization of constructed areas with the liberation of empty spaces, green areas, no definition of lot limits, and finally the unity of architecture and urbanism, that is, with architecture taken as main basis for the urban design. Since the presentation of Lúcio Costa's 1936 design, however, the intention to establish separate roads for vehicles and pedestrians present in the initial Le Corbusier study was discarded.

THE VARGAS ERA AND MODERN ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM

Three years after the end of the Vargas Era, in 1948 Affonso Eduardo Reidy, one of the main supporters of the movement for modernity, was heading the newly created City Planning Department^{xxiv}, part of the municipal administration. This shows that the modern movement, as a process, was already firmly established among the official milieu.

Some of the contributing factors to the process, like Le Corbusier's visits, the publication of papers in technical journals and the gradual acceptance by architects to the modernist cause, were not connected with the Vargas administration. Nonetheless, some others were clearly government decisions and therefore were products of the Vargas Era, like Cidade Universitária, the Ministry of Education and Health building and the opening of Avenida Presidente Vargas.

The modern style, however, was not the official choice of the Vargas Era. Some urban works and buildings executed during that period were based on more traditional values, resulting in the coexistence the city of Rio de Janeiro of distinct expressions both in architecture and urbanism. In urbanism, as seen when considering the Avenida Presidente Vargas project, the representations wavered between academic and the modern principles.

In the architectural area, the Ministry of Education and Health building, with its modern features, was the main architectural landmark. All the same, some other structures were also built on modernist principles, like the new buildings for the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Labor and Ministry of War^{xxv}. On the diversity of architectural styles, Cavalcanti states^{xxvi} (p. 20),

During the Estado Novo dictatorship, the building of ministry headquarters in such different styles perhaps will eliminate the belief in the state's monolithic ideology, for one of the most rigid dictatorships we have seen erected buildings with decidedly diverse features.

In the same light, Segawa^{xxvii} states in his analysis of the language of architecture (p. 93),

It is not possible to identify in the Vargas Era architecture a common architectural denominator. Notwithstanding the reference character of the Ministry of Education and Health building - today called Gustavo Capanema Palace - through its influence in that period and its international recognition as a landmark of modern architecture, the government action in its various ministerial fronts never managed to establish a unified, coherent, architectural language.

Still, if modern architecture was not the single choice of the Vargas administration, it certainly allowed modernist principles to find a place favorable to their development within a period marked by initiatives for economic, political and cultural renewal, in which important achievements were made both in the architectural and the urbanism fields.

Their development during that period (1930 -1945) was evident, with the later recognition of their original manifestations in the book and the exposition entitled "Brazil Builds" presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1943:

While the first impetus came from abroad, Brazil soon went ahead on her own.^{xxviii}

During the 1930s, the building of a strong, national state, able to face problems by means of organized management, was a part of the aspirations manifested by some Brazilian intellectuals. The building of a nation clearly different from that previous to 1930, the so-called Old Republic, was present in governmental activity, reaching different sectors of national life.

The reformist ideal was incorporated in the Vargas administration, translated by the hands of a cosmopolitan, technical elite, acquainted with foreign examples, among them Minister Gustavo Capanema, who was responsible for choosing the modern designs for the Ministry of Education and Health building and Cidade Universitária. It is also important to mention, among others, Anísio Teixeira in the education area, whose importance lies in his innovative proposals related to the 'New School' based on John Dewey's ideas^{xxix}.

The stated intention of forging a new national ideal in contrast to that existing until 1930, by extensive reforms in different sectors of public life, seems to have thus contributed to the blossoming of universal principles seen as able to draw Brazil nearer to other more developed countries. Modernism and its objectives of rationality and universality were closer to the proposals adopted in other sectors of Brazilian public life^{xxx}.

On the other hand, for the reaffirmation of its central power, the Vargas government intensely employed symbols, including in its urban works, wide streets and monumental constructions. Throughout the history of the cities, symbolism and monumentality^{xxx} have been used as part of an urbanism of dominion, to reaffirm the power, at times absolute, of the constituted authorities. Kostof, concerning the Grand Manner or Baroque urbanism, whose elements include triumphal arches, wide streets, commemorative monuments and monumental buildings, affirms:

“The presumption of absolute power explains the appeal of the Grand Manner for the totalitarian regimes of the Thirties - for the likes of Mussolini, Hitler and Stalin.” He continues: *“It is about the staging of power... All cities are, of course, repositories of power in varying degrees and patterns. Cities designed in the Grand Manner imply conventions that make power manifest”^{xxxii}.*

In this way, President Vargas Avenue and the buildings for Ministry of Education and Health and other public institutions served the purpose of strengthening the signs of power while reinforcing the image of Rio de Janeiro as the capital city of both the Republic and the Estado Novo, through the establishment of architectural and urban landmarks. The new avenue, for instance, was not only the greatest urban achievement in the city’s downtown area, but would also serve as a future stage for large patriotic parades^{xxxiii} - as happened in several other countries under authoritarian regimes at the same time - during national newly created holidays like Workers Day, National Day, Revolution Day (Tenth of November) and Flag Day^{xxxiv}.

Regarding the relationship between modern architecture and urbanism during the Vargas Era, though we cannot consider it the official choice, the modernist proposals and achievements did result to a great extent from government choices of certain designs over others and the country’s progress, which was made easier by the rationalization of public policies in a number of sectors, including finance.

The modern ideals also satisfied the search for new elements to constitute the Brazilian nation as it was then seen, and they also played a symbolic role. A new architecture and new urbanism - even when these were not espoused by all official sectors - served as hallmarks of a revitalized nation. In this respect, these developments were a precursor to the efforts to build the long dreamed of new national capital, Brasília, in the country’s central plateau, which came to fruition in the late 1950s. That city, with its still strikingly modern layout and structures, would be launched as a symbol of the new rapidly industrializing country. Ironically, it also would mark the end of Rio de Janeiro’s period as the nation’s capital.

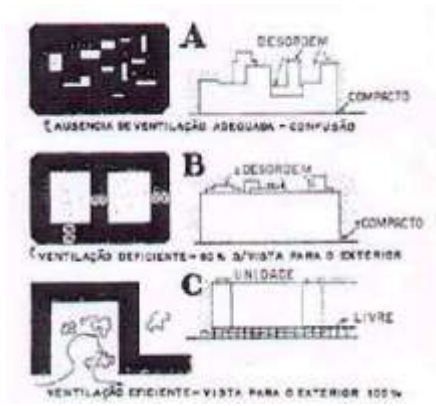


Figure 1 - Types of Urban Blocks, C represents the “rédent” type
 Silva, H. A. and Fusco, R. (1942), *Revista Municipal de Engenharia*.

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iii Le Corbusier, *Précisions sur un état présent de l’architecture et l’urbanism* (Paris: Éditions G. Grès, 1930).

iv Letter addressed to Oswaldo Costa dated April 22, 1930, in which he laments the agreement signed in acceptance of the plan designed by an architect marginal to the Machinist Era. See Pereira, Margareth, S., et al., *Le Corbusier e o Brasil* (São Paulo: Tessela/Projeto, 1987).

v The City Planning Commission functioned from 1930 to 1931 and its main task was to assess the Agache Plan. It was recreated by the Decree-Law 6092, issued on November 8 1937 President Vargas.

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xxi Saarinen, Eliel, *The City, its Growth, its Decay, its Future* (New York: Reinhold, 1943).

xxii The opening of the 80-meter wide avenue required the demolition of 525 buildings. Reis, José de Oliveira (1994) “50 Anos da Avenida Presidente Vargas”, *Revista Municipal de Engenharia*, according to Brito, Hélio Alves de, (1944) “Obras da Avenida Presidente Vargas”, *Revista Municipal de Engenharia*, 3/4, 100-111.

xxiii Costa, Lúcio, *Registro de uma Vivência*, (São Paulo: Empresa das Artes, 1995).

xxiv It resulted from the former City Planning Commission determined by Decree-Law 8305 of December 6, 1945.

xxv The headquarters buildings of the various federal ministries, despite the diversity of the styles adopted, contained national elements, as wall tiles and paintings, lending them an intentional unity. See Motta, Marly, *Rio, Cidade-capital* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2004), 39.

xxvi Cavalcanti, Lauro, *Preocupações do Belo* (Rio de Janeiro: Taurus, 1995).

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xxviii Goodwin, Philip, *Brazil Builds: Architecture New and Old, 1652-1942*, photographs by G. E. Kidder Smith (New York: MoMA, 1943), 81.

xxix In 1927, Teixeira traveled to the United States where he contacted John Dewey, the most important exponent of the “New School” trend. See Sarmento, Carlos Eduardo, *O Rio de Janeiro na Era Pedro Ernesto* (Rio de Janeiro: Ed. FGV, 2001).

xxx The reforms undertaken in the areas of finance, education, culture, health, administration and politics were related to the principles of rationality and universality. In public administration, for instance, a professional civil service system was established.

xxxi For a discussion on monumentality, see Giedion, S., Sert, J. L. and Léger, F. “Nine points on monumentality”, in Ockman, J. (ed.) *Architecture culture 1943-1968. A documentary anthology*. (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 27-28.

xxxii Kostof, S. *The city shaped*. (Boston: BulFinch Press Book, 1999), 217, 271.

xxxiii These patriotic parades were one of the Vargas Era’s features and they were put on at the facilities of Vasco da Gama Regatta Club until the opening of Presidente Vargas Avenue in 1944.

xxxiv In his 1942 analysis of the Vargas Era, Lowenstein showed the importance of such symbols for the dictatorial regime, particularly the creation of national holidays besides the existing religious ones. As he stated: “Modern dictatorships have taught us the eminent value of symbolism for the emotionalization of national politics.” Lowenstein, Karl, *Brazil under Vargas* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1942), 305.