Other texts by Julian Dibbell

Tropical Millennium

Photo by Augusto C. B. Areal

The Cult (and Cults) of Brasília

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Thirty miles north of Brasília -- the sleek, space-age capital of Brazil -- lies a rough-hewn little town called the Valley of the Dawn. And high above the Valley of the Dawn, untold miles high, hovers a fleet of vessels from a far-off planet known to its inhabitants as Capela. The fleet's existence is common knowledge in the town below, but not easily confirmed by standard scientific methods. You could look for the ships all day -- the sky is vast and beautiful over these flat, desolate highlands -- but you wouldn't see them. Nor would radar pick them up, or radio, or satellite reconnaissance. Contact, in short, must be made through means other than those provided by the material world. And here in the Valley it is made at least twice a day, 365 days a year.

The secret behind such regular contact lies not so much in technology as in a steady supply of technicians: out of the Valley's roughly 5000 residents, all but a handful are active psychic mediums. A demographic like that would not be easy to come by in most places in the world, but Brasília and its immediate environs are not very much like most places in the world. Brasília sprouted fully-formed in the middle of Brazil's otherwise empty Central Plateau just over three decades ago. Planning the city down to its minutest details, Brasília's architects intended it to stand as a monument to technocracy and rational design. But the Brazilian people have turned it into something much more interesting: they have made it a beacon of the irrational, investing the city with a millennial significance that approaches that of Jerusalem, or Mecca, and draws the mystically inclined from all over Brazil.

The Valley of the Dawn is only one out of hundreds of local sects, communities, and other visionary gatherings, but as the best-known of them it can count on a continuous influx of enthusiastic believers. So that when the calls go out for the Ceremony of the Burning Star each afternoon at 12:30 and 2:30 (with a 6:30 session added on weekdays), there is always at least a dozen or so mediums available to participate, and often as many as a hundred.

They gather at the edge of town in an area that, with its elaborate artificial waterworks and brightly painted abstract monuments, takes monumental modernism on a long detour through the aesthetic of the miniature golf course. Likewise, the vestments of the group can't seem to decide between the solemnity of the Roman Catholic Church and that of a Dungeons-and-Dragons players' convention. Men (or jaguars, as they are known in the often bewildering mythology of the Valley) come wrapped in a floor-length cape that rises up into an ear-high, Barnabas Collins-issue collar. Women (nymphs) get colorful costume dresses that vary according to storybook notions of historical reference, a toga hinted at here, a medieval wimple there. Accessories abound -- ceremonial swords and lances, badges and medallions stamped with obscure symbols.

Beneath the watchful eyes of a two-story-tall cutout image of Mother Yara,

Amerindian water-goddess and patron-spirit of this ceremony, the celebrants slowly march to their positions along the edge of the "Burning Star" -- a 100-foot-wide pool of water shaped like a Star of David. An elliptical, antennalike sculpture juts up from the center of the pool, and at the points of the star loudspeakers blare out jaunty prerecorded hymns followed by a droning, Indo-Afro-Assyrian-inflected liturgy that the congregation echoes in hardy unison:

"Oh Simiromba of the Great East of Oxalá, in the Enchanted World of the Himalayas, prepare my way, illuminate my spirit, so that I may go forth fearless in the final advance of a new age..."

Contact has commenced. A psychic uplink to the interplanetary fleet has been established, and some of the worshippers now show signs of possession, convulsing and moaning softly. They are absorbing Earth's negative spirits, the ones that converge on world capitals like Brasília, the ones that spur the leaders of nations on to strife and corruption, and they are transmitting them to the ships, where they will be converted into positive energy and beamed back in a well-defined current that flows down through the antenna in the middle of the Burning Star and on to the sect's temple in the center of town. From there the energy will be transported back to the city by the nightly stream of Brasilia's broken souls that passes through the temple in search of succor.

The Valley is a kind of cosmic power plant, in other words -- the administrative center of a vast, technometaphysical circulatory system, with the capital's great reservoir of bad vibes at one end and the space fleet's transforming purity at the other. Where the cycle starts and where it terminates, however, is hard to judge. A safe guess, ventured at a safe remove from Brasilia's mythic atmosphere, would say the ships are the end-product, conjured by the seething mass of hopes and disappointments Brasilia represents. But from the shores of the Burning Star no guess looks safe, and it's just as easy to believe Brasilia itself is the conjured object, reinvented daily by the aliens.

Efigênia Dias Bicalho sees auras. She sees them without even trying to, and in the midst of conversation she may pause to comment on the shape and color of yours, as if she were simply taking note of some item of clothing you'd put on that day. She has seen auras all her life. She has also seen entities from other dimensions, and the vessels they travel in. And the future. And this isn't all she's seen.

Efigênia lives in a suburb of Brasília now, but she spent her childhood in the southeastern state of Minas Gerais with her grandmother Rosa, a seven-foot-tall, hundred-year-old black woman of legendary psychic abilities. In the early '50s, Efigênia recalls, their home was visited with some frequency by a man named Juscelino Kubitschek. Kubitschek was a powerful local politician, and he came to Efigênia's home for spiritual and tactical guidance from Grandma Rosa -- not an especially unlikely scenario in a country whose national religion is two parts official Catholicism and beaucoup parts African-flavored spiritism.

Time after time Kubitschek came to Rosa to unload the typical anxieties of a career politico, but one day in 1953 he appeared with an ear-to-ear grin on his face and a parchment scroll tied up with yellow ribbon in his hand. When he unrolled the parchment before Efigênia and her grandmother, they saw the outlines of a wondrous and alien-looking city. Kubitschek told them that these plans had been dictated to him on a recent night by seven extraterrestrial beings. And Grandma Rosa told him that one day he would preside over the building of a great city just like this one.

Which, as any Brazilian schoolchild can tell you, he did. Elected president of Brazil in 1956, Kubitschek threw his weight behind a long-moldering plan to move the capital from Rio de Janeiro to the heart of the nation. Construction work began in 1957, and by the time Kubitschek left office in 1961, the world's newest metropolis was open for business. Years later Efigênia Dias Bicalho finally laid eyes on the city, but the moment was anticlimactic.

"I'd already seen it all," she says, "on the parchment. I wasn't the least bit startled."

And maybe she wasn't. But few people who know Brasília can claim such equanimity for their first encounter. Far more typical was the response of Yuri Gagarin, Soviet cosmonaut and first man in space, who visited Brasília in the '60s and came away apparently more unsettled than he'd ever been in orbit. "I feel," he told the president after his first day in the city, "as if I had stepped on to the surface of another planet."

Presumably Gagarin's remark was taken as praise. Brasília seems intended, after all, to give the impression of having been built neither by nor for mere earthlings. A race

of hyperintelligent Volkswagens, perhaps, or aliens who speak a language made up entirely of Euclidean axioms, might be expected to feel at home in this sidewalk-poor zone of perfectly circulating asphalt arteries and relentlessly clean lines of design -- but not any species as puny and unkempt as homo sapiens.

Thirty years after Brasília's inauguration, however, the built-in alienation effects have lost much of their edge. The strangeness is as strange as ever, but it's grown cozily dated, and the first-time visitor's otherworldly head-trip now mingles with the distinct sensation of having stepped into an episode of *The Jetsons*. Brasília's endless vistas and obsessively logical layout (not to mention its cheery devotion to the private automobile) conjure a future that went way out of style sometime around the first world oil crisis, a future in which resources are limitless and rational central planning is the answer to every social problem. As futures go it's got its charms -- but then so do bad '50s sci-fi movies.

Brasília, in other words, has come into its own as a masterwork of retro kitsch, still gamely proclaiming itself the shape of things to come while the past into which it was born cloaks it like a fake leopard-skin wrap. The smell of that past hangs everywhere, but for a really good whiff nothing beats the pharaonic tomb of Juscelino Kubitschek, a marble-plated, trapezoidal traffic island rising amid eight lanes of superhighway slicing through the city center. Just outside the entrance sits Kubitschek's trusty Galaxie 500, enshrined in a glass case, and inside the tomb a steady Muzak flow bathes the president's mortal remains in the hits of his city's heyday: "Love Me Tender," "Strangers in the Night," "Michelle," "The Theme From *A Man and a Woman*."

But the centerpiece of this time capsule is the photographs that run along one wall, like hieroglyphs inside a pyramid, telling the story of the ruler's heroic acts: Kubitschek turning on a newly constructed hydroelectric plant; Kubitschek in a tractor clearing vegetation for his new capital; Kubitschek among maps and graphs, presenting to the public Brazil's first "Global Development Plan," the scheme that lay behind all this activity.

The plan bristled with projects and target quotas, and the linchpin of them all was Brasília. Construction of the city would, if all went by the book, jump-start key industrial sectors and galvanize the economy straight into the first world. Likewise, Brasília's design, entrusted to a pair of hardcore local Bauhausers, would plant the elegant efficiency of modernist architecture deep in the heart of Brazilian culture. In one hard, swift tug, Brasília was going to yank the nation into full-fledged modernity.

The plan sounded scientific enough, but in fact what drove it was the logic of the cargo cult: Brasília was a magic spell, an overgrown amulet held out to the gods of development in hopes that they would rain down the riches of advanced capitalism on poor, messed-up Brazil. It was powerful magic, to be sure, bold and theatrical and verging on national self-hypnosis. But at this late date the spell's success is open to debate. Brazil remains wedged as solidly as it ever was in an interesting but not so comfortable limbo between the first and third worlds, and there has been speculation that the enormous sums spent on building Brasília jump-started nothing more than the nonstop triple-digit inflation and massive foreign debt that help keep Brazil in that limbo.

But if the rational plans of Brasília's authors failed to bear fruit, the seeds of magical thinking hidden in them fell on fertile ground and thrived. To the quiet bemusement of the architects, who strived to instill in their designs only the purest functionalism, the public began almost immediately to scrutinize Brasília for secret messages. Like clouds on the horizon, or tea leaves at the bottom of a cup, the city's abstract forms suggested concrete objects and meanings. The very layout, it was soon and famously discovered, had the shape of a jetliner -- an appropriate symbol for Brasília's modernizing project, and a handy one as well, since it could be seen as landing, taking off, or crashing, depending on one's sympathies with said project.

Over the years the art of reading Brasília deepened and took on increasingly mystical dimensions. More symbols were uncovered, power points were located. The huge television-broadcast tower dominating the downtown landscape was designated a transmitter of psychic as well as electromagnetic energies, and the twin skyscrapers of the national congress turned out to be a kind of urban Stonehenge, positioned so that on the anniversary of Brasília's inauguration the sun rises precisely between the two buildings.

Eventually a book was written, by a free-floating professor of Egyptology named Iara Kern, cataloging the various Kabbalistic, numerological, and Tarot-related codes inscribed in the city's structures. On sale at the official bookstore of Kubitschek's tomb, the book leaves no slab of concrete unturned, noting, for instance, that the

three-leveled central bus-station can be read as a horizontal H, symbolizing mortal man (*homem* in Portuguese) and the three levels of his consciousness (id, ego, superego), while the legislative buildings are clearly an erect H, standing, of course, for immortal man.

Control of the city's meaning having thus decisively passed out of its authors' hands, stripping them of their very authorship was a small step, which Professor Kern's book takes at a flying run. At the root of her pack-rat's nest of arcane symbologies lies a single sweeping premise: that the true creative force behind Brasília was neither the architects nor, strictly speaking, Kubitschek himself, but rather the great pharaoh Akhnaton, reincarnated in the body of the Brazilian president. Kern has compelling evidence on her side. How else, after all, does one explain the strikingly pyramidal structure of the municipal electric company headquarters and other key buildings? And while it might be argued that Kubitschek looks as much like a cross-wired reincarnation of Cesar Romero and John Belushi as he does like Akhnaton, the physical resemblance is undeniable.

Still, as powerful as these arguments may be, their proofs are at bottom only circumstantial. And those who have seen the truth with their own eyes, as Efigênia Dias Bicalho did on that long ago night of 1953, know that in fact the city's origins cannot be found in Ancient Egypt or anywhere else on Earth: Brasília came to this world from a higher plane, and to a higher plane it is destined to return.

"What I can tell you is this," says Brother Myron, medium in training, his arms folded over a long white robe, his eyes aimed confidently out into the brilliant light of a tropical Sunday afternoon. "This place is different."

"This place is different," he repeats, "and if at one time it was programmed in the spiritual plan that the United States was to be the land of the New Age, since then the collective karma of the U.S. has been compromised -- by excessive participation in military conflicts, by misuse of atomic power -- and today everything indicates that the center of activity of the Third Millennium has been shifted to the heart of Brazil. And that center is precisely here, where we are standing at this moment."

Where we are standing is an hour's drive southeast of Brasília, on the steps of a neo-classical temple camped incongruously amid the red dirt and deep greens of the capital's surrounding countryside. Inside the temple, the poor, the pious, and the put-upon from near and far consult with a battalion of full-fledged, white-robed mediums possessed by the shades of long-dead Indians and black slaves, who bring healing power from the spirit world and words of wisdom from their lord Jesus Christ. Outside, scattered around the temple, lie the buildings of a self-sustaining, cashless community of some 600 spiritual seekers -- the City of the Universal Spiritualist Eclectic Brotherhood, First Essene Sanctuary of Brazil and the Americas.

The Eclectic City is older than Brasília, but not by much. It was founded in 1956, when the disciples of self-made messiah Master Yokaanam (formerly Lieutenant Oceano de Sa of the Brazilian Air Force) followed him into the wilderness of the Central Plateau, just months before the new capital's construction got underway. Members of the brotherhood like to suggest a causal link between the two events, but if it was part of Yokaanam's plan to bring the national capital along with him when he left Rio de Janeiro, that was merely a small first stage on the way to a much more ambitious goal: to establish here the nucleus of a great, global civilization, ruled by cosmic justice and love.

Yokaanam received the assignment one day in 1944, in the midst of a routine flight over central Brazil, when a mysterious entity appeared to him and told of the glorious destiny that awaited him on the ground directly below. At the time, the young pilot's future plans did not include carving out a life in the middle of nowhere, and he told the mysterious entity as much. The being made no reply, but almost instantly Yokaanam found his plane plunging headlong into a close encounter with the promised land, and when he came to in a hospital bed, he thought better of his reluctance. The very next day he began preparing for the move.

But it wasn't just the strong-arming of higher powers that gave Yokaanam's project its urgency. Like many people in close contact with the psychic dimensions since then, he'd been informed that the central highlands of Brazil were among the few regions on Earth marked for exemption from the earthquakes, floods, and pestilence that were to usher in the coming age of spiritual plenty. And he had it on good authority as well that these end times were fast approaching, in the form of a huge planet, 300 times the size of ours, winging its way silently and invisibly earthwards for a near collision that would sweep the less psychically evolved two thirds of humanity out into space and set the great transition rolling.

"In those days this was something a crazy person would say, a nut," says Brother Myron with the cheerful calm that marks his every utterance. "But today, I believe scientists have acquired some information about this planet. NASA itself, if I am not mistaken, now knows about it, and it seems they've even given it a name -- Barnard I."

If at times Brother Myron sounds (and, even in his prophetlike raiment, looks) less like a devout spiritualist than like a pocket-protected, factoid-friendly technocrat, that's no surprise, or even much of a contradiction: before an inner voice summoned him to the Eclectic City four years ago, he trained and worked as an economist, and ultimately the career change wasn't as radical as it might seem. For decades Brazil's social engineers have been poring obsessively over the economic indicators, looking in desperation for a pathway out of the thralldom of foreign debt and chronic semidevelopment and into the sovereign prosperity long promised by Brazil's abundant natural resources. Myron's quest is not much different, with the notable exception that he has actually found the pathway, and knows that following it is just a matter of waiting, attentively and virtuously, for the cosmic plan to unfold.

And unfold it does. The Master's spirit may have departed his wiry, grey-bearded body over seven years ago, but with every new pilgrim who follows an inner voice to the Central Plateau, Yokaanam's mission comes closer to completion. For those who live in it, the Eclectic City by its continued existence proves what Brasília's futuristic grandeur only hints at: One day Brazil will lead the nations of the world, humbling the great Northern powers of today. One day New York City, and all the banks Brazil has sold its economic soul to for a shot at becoming a player on the world stage, will lie sunken beneath the waves of the cataclysmic leap into the Aquarian Age, while Brasília shines pristine and safe, a haven for the enlightened elite that is gathering there even now.

"Yes, you all are the First World," says Myron, aiming a serene smile at his American visitor. "And we here are what you call the Third World. Very well. But one day" -- and here his serenity strains to suppress a mischievous glee -- "one day all this will change."

Meanwhile, this side of the millennium, there is work to do. Back at the Valley of the Dawn the last shift of the Burning Star ceremony has ended, and the participants are inching single-file into the main temple, now thick with bittersweet incense haze and the industrious bustle of the evening's public healing sessions. Sending up hymns to the menagerie of spirits that watches over the Valley, the procession snakes its way through the temple towards a brightly lit altar upon which, one by one, the mediums hand over their swords, their lances, and the positive energies they have gathered from the ships. They are hardly noticed amid the incantations and censer smoke of a dozen or so simultaneous rituals filling up the nooks and crannies of this cavelike building. In one area a bank of spirit-channeling mediums hears the sorrows of afflicted visitors and directs them to the proper ritual treatment; in another a seance table attempts to instruct unruly and bad-tempered spirits in love of God and their fellow souls; here and there decoratively chained "prisoners" -- mediums committed to a temporary and figurative state of bondage in order to pay off a karmic debt -- dart through the crowds with pen and notebook in hand, trying to solicit enough sympathetic signatures to secure their "release."

At the center of all these goings on, hovering in mid-air, hangs a larger-than-life photo-portrait of a tough-looking middle-aged woman. Her face lurks somewhere beneath a Kabuki-esque excess of makeup, her varnished, jet-black bouffant adds at least four inches to her height, and her name is well-known to anyone within shouting distance of the picture: she is Aunt Neiva. Or was. Aunt Neiva "deincarnated" the same year as Master Yokaanam, coincidentally or not, and though the Valley has continued to thrive without her, there seems to be in everything the locals say and do a melancholy trace of longing for the woman whose powerful clairvoyance and radiant charisma brought the Valley of the Dawn into being.

For the first 32 years of Neiva Chaves Zelaya's life, that woman remained hidden, even from Neiva herself, beneath a more or less typical Brazilian existence: she was born in the drought-plagued Northeast, grew up amid its rural poverty, became a wife, became a widow, strived mightily to raise four children on her own. It wasn't until 1957, when she came to work on the construction of Brasília as a truck driver (and allegedly as the first woman so licensed in Brazil), that the visitations began. At first she thought she was going insane: voices came to her, and visions, at the most inopportune moments. She was pestered and cajoled by beings calling themselves Mother Yara and Father White Arrow, who sought to convince her that they were her spiritual mentors and that she had a great and prophetic work to carry out.

After two years she relented, leaving Brasília to found a small community and orphanage in the nearby state of Goiás -- and to deepen her psychic abilities. Before long her powers grew so evolved that she was living simultaneously on the earthly and the astral planes: on this side of the Great Divide she continued the worldly struggle to sustain and uplift her now expanded "family"; on the other she studied with a wise Tibetan monk, conversed with historical personages from the Roman Empire and the French Revolution, and went on joyrides in the Capelan space ships. Throughout this 10-year period she remained under the close guidance of Yara and White Arrow, and when finally they directed her to the site of the Valley of the Dawn and told her to build a new city there, she didn't hesitate.

And from that point on, every element in the town's design, every new sculpture or waterway or communal building, was shaped by the direct inspiration of Aunt Neiva's extraterrestrial guides. Or so her followers claim. And yet to anyone arriving in the Valley of the Dawn from Brasília today, it's clear that the deeper inspiration behind the town lies much closer to home. Neiva's participation in the mythic creation of Brazil's new capital seems to have not only set her on her decades-long path to psychic preeminence, but pursued her as a kind of obsession throughout the length of it: to wander among the abstract yet wildly ornamental structures that compose the Valley of the Dawn is to lose oneself in a bonsai, pop simulacrum of Brasília itself.

Nor does this correspondence limit itself to the realm of the physical. The Valley simulates Brasília organizationally as well, dividing its members into an elaborate hierarchy that seems to parody the complex bureaucracies that enmesh the federal capital and employ (at their lower levels) a good many of the Valley's residents and adherents. Ethnographer James Holston has even suggested that the petition drives of the "prisoners" secretly mime the endless politicking and electioneering of Brasília's most prominent citizens.

If all this is true, then the Valley is not in direct contact with the source of its magic at all, but stands instead at a baroque double remove from it, fetishizing a city which itself is nothing more than a fetish of national development. Like the Eclectic City, then, the Valley of the Dawn is a shadow of the shadow of a longstanding and perennially broken promise of a better life for the people of Brazil, and as such any realistic critique would have to see this would-be phantom state as merely a sad state of affairs, a twice-faded descent from hard-headed political purpose into airy and ineffectual fantasy.

But any realistic critique, of course, would miss the point by a margin wide enough to fly a space fleet through. The genius of the Valley of the Dawn, after all, of the Eclectic City, of the visions of Iara Kern and Efigenia Dias Bicalho, is that they transform a soulless reality into a very real magic. They effect a healthy perversion of Brasília's developmentalist energies into a spiritual and healing developmentalism (a project that was never more urgent than now, when Brazil has become the chief battlefield in the holy world war to achieve sustainable development). And in the process they provide genuine comfort to people whom fate and the State have failed repeatedly.

To recognize this achievement is to step decisively outside the terms of the urban-studies debate that still rages around Brasilia. Die-hard modernists cling with fierce pride to the ideals of abstract grace the city embodies, while postmodern populists just as fiercely attack its inhuman design, and the populists are right of course: Brasilia wasn't built for humans. But the aliens it *was* built for started moving in a long time ago, and as it happens they're a remarkably well-intentioned bunch. They may or may not save humanity from itself in the end, but already they've succeeded in making their hometown a healthy place for human habitation.