

Episode 117: Planned Cities

Summary

Nick and Wendy visit the Brazilian capital Brasília. They talk about their impressions of Brasília and about other planned cities such as Washington, D.C. and Canberra.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are talking about planned cities, because we just visited one, which is, of course, Brasília, the capital of Brazil, which was only built in the 1960s. And it's, I guess, noteworthy¹ about Brasília is that the two cities that it gets compared to in the world, which are also the two cities that are mentioned in our guide book when they introduce Brasília, are the two capitals of our respective countries, which are Washington, D.C., in the United States for you, and Canberra in Australia for me.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: And so maybe we'll compare them a little bit later on. But to begin with, what were your impressions of Brasília?

Wendy: Umm, well, let me start by saying that I didn't really expect to like Brasília. Umm, and I didn't like it very much, I have to say. Umm, I mean, I much prefer old styles of architecture, so I prefer the colonial cities in Brazil like São Luís and Recife and others that we're planning to visit later on that I'm sure I'll also love. Umm, I don't really like modern architecture, I don't find it very attractive. And, umm, I just ... Brasília seems like a really strange place to me. Umm, I just got a very weird vibe² while I was there. And a lot of it was circumstantial³ as well. Umm, it was raining for pretty much the whole time that we were there, so that definitely influenced the way that I saw the city. We probably would have seen more of the city if it hadn't been raining so much. And then we ended up staying in this very strange hotel. I won't go into the details but ... so all of that kind of, you know, compounded⁴ and made it to be not a particularly pleasant experience. But, uhh, what did you think?

¹ noteworthy: interesting, worth mentioning or pointing out

² weird vibe: strange feeling

³ circumstantial: relating to the particular circumstance or conditions of our visit

⁴ compounded: increased, added to

Nick: No, I agree, for sure. Umm, I mean, firstly we weren't even necessarily planning to go to Brasília at all. Umm, but when we came back into Brazil, into the Pantanal, to get to where we were trying to get to, it just made sense to go to Brasília. And because the distances are very long, we decided to just rest there a couple of days, umm, because it took us, I think, 27 hours to get there by bus and then the next bus from Brasília took 39 hours. Umm, so it was definitely a good place to break up the journey. You know, planned cities have certain reputations for being quite sterile⁵, quite soulless, a bit too ordered and organised, and, yeah, I mean, we saw that with Brasília. So I'm probably - even more than you - a fan of history and old architecture and things like that, and in Brasília of course you have none of that. So, no, certainly it wasn't a great place for me either. Did you ... was it like you thought it would be?

Wendy: Hmm, no, I think it was probably worse than I thought it would be. Umm, well, it's a place that's made for cars and not for pedestrians, umm, which is the case in most cities in the United States, where I'm from, and so that's one of the things that I really like about living in Europe, is that the cities were built a long time ago, they were built before cars. And so if you're in the centre of the city you can usually walk around to get to all the places that you want to go to, whereas⁶ in Brasília, that wasn't the case⁷. There was very little that was in ... within walking distance of where we were staying, even though we were staying, you know, in the centre of the city. So that's annoying. Umm...

Nick: Yeah, I mean there's not a historical core or this central core where everything you might want to visit is right nearby. And that's obviously what you can do with a planned city is that you can spread things out more. So, yeah, we walked, we had to walk a long way to get to certain things. I will say, though, on the other hand, that there were good footpaths.

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: Uhh, so that's something. Basically, I mean Brasília is laid out⁸ in a very planned way. And so these ... the larger roads are all kind of parallel to each other, and one thing they did that I did really quite like on these larger roads, was that on the side of the road you had a kind of patch⁹ of grass, and then a little bit in from that you had a footpath and then more grass before the buildings started, so there was quite a large gap between the roads and the buildings, and there were also quite a lot of trees in those areas. And so we got to, you know, walk on these

⁵ sterile: exceptionally clean, in a negative way (in this case)

⁶ whereas: while on the contrary, while on the other hand. See also: Episodes 10 and 27.

⁷ that wasn't the case: that wasn't true, that wasn't the situation

⁸ laid out: arranged, organised. See also: Episodes 17, 98 and 106.

⁹ patch: small piece of material or land

footpaths, you know, not right up against the cars, and there were some trees around, so that was OK.

Wendy: Yeah, that's true. Umm, I mean, yeah, it's built for cars but I guess they do also try to, you know, keep the pedestrians in mind as well and they do create these nice sidewalks or footpaths for pedestrians. But it's just the distances that make it really difficult if you're trying to actually get around, just on foot.

Nick: And so as you said, we perhaps didn't go and see everything that we might have because it was raining and because we were tired from the bus and because we only really spent a day-and-a-half there. Umm, probably the most famous of the modern architecture sites there is the cathedral, which is not at all as you would imagine a normal cathedral or a historic cathedral. It's a very striking modern building, it's very hard to describe, maybe you can have a better go at it than me.

Wendy: Umm, well, it's covered in, umm, windows, basically. Stained glass windows make up pretty much, you know, all of the walls, so it lets in lots of light in that way and it's quite an interesting building from the inside. And we saw another church like that as well, that we just happened to pass by by accident. I didn't know anything about it, umm, but that was also completely covered in stained glass windows. And that was really beautiful, I actually ... that was my favourite thing we saw in Brasília, was this other chapel. It's called the Chapel of Dom Bosco, I believe. Umm, and so, I mean the stained glass windows, you know, they weren't like the ones you see in a historic cathedral. They were modern, you could tell that they were modern. But they were made of, uhh, different shades of blue and, uhh, it just made a very peaceful setting inside when you're surrounded by all this stained glass, this coloured glass. Umm, so, yeah, I did enjoy both of those two buildings, those are really the only ones that we visited on the inside. Umm, but just looking at some of the other modern architecture from the outside, some of these buildings that are, you know, supposed to be the highlights of Brasília, and I just think they're really ugly.

Nick: Yeah, I agree. So, thinking about comparing Brasília with these other planned cities. Now, you haven't actually been to Washington, D.C.

Wendy: No, I have not.

Nick: Umm, but I have, and I also used to live in Canberra, because I went to university there for three years. Umm, and so going to Brasília, yeah, it made me think a little about these other cities. And, you know, I think there ... I think Brasília is more different from other typical cities in Brazil than in those other two cases. And I think there's probably two reasons for that. And the first is that Brazil is still a developing country. It's developed quite a lot quite quickly in the last few decades, but certainly going back to the 1960s when Brasília was built, it was a developing country. And so what that has meant is that in terms of things like security, infrastructure, services, I'm sure those things are all much better and greater in Brasília than perhaps in some other cities. And Brazil is known for being a little bit

dangerous, and so you can kind of imagine that a Brazilian could come from another city to Brasília and think, 'Wow, this actually could be a model city that ... for Brazilians to live in.' And I think if you look at Canberra, nobody thinks that, umm, because it's already in a developed country, so these services and facilities are no better than in Sydney or Melbourne or anywhere else. And so you just think, 'OK, it's a similar level of development and infrastructure as these other cities, but it's just far less interesting and, you know, doesn't have character or ambience or anything like that.' Umm, and then other thing is that, as we've talked about before, especially in our episode about São Paulo, Brazil is so dynamic, it's so vibrant, there's so much music everywhere, so many people and there's so much activity on the street and it's such an amazing culture, and in Brasília there's nothing like that.

Wendy: Yeah, and that really is a huge contrast, because in other cities, anywhere you go in Brazil, you hear music everywhere. Uhh, lots of times we've come across, umm, musicians and different kinds of drumming, umm, performances on the street, all different kinds of music. And it just seems like there's always something happening. And, yeah, in Brasília nothing was happening. Granted¹⁰, it was raining, so maybe that was part of it, but I also think that those kinds of things just don't happen there.

Nick: Yeah, and we had come into Brazil from ... or in the Pantanal. We'd come from Bolivia and when we were in Bolivia and Paraguay, you know, we thought, 'Oh, it'll be great when we get back to Brazil.' And in the Pantanal, of course, you're in this rural area so it doesn't really feel exactly like Brazil. And we got to Brasília, and we're like, 'Oh, this isn't Brazil either!'

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: 'Like, where is this Brazil that we've been trying to get back to?'

Wendy: Yeah.

Nick: And then eventually we found it when we went to the northeast, umm, to these colonial cities, and that's what we'll talk about next time.

Wendy: Great, and we will have lots more positive things to say about that.

¹⁰ granted: admittedly

Comprehension Questions

1. Why did Nick and Wendy visit Brasília, given that they didn't really want to?
2. What were the two main reasons Wendy mentioned for not liking Brasília?
3. What were the two reasons Nick gave for his theory that Brasília is more different from other cities in Brazil than in the case of Canberra or Washington, D.C.?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. Some Hostelling International hostels are quite _____. They're just a series of corridors and rooms without any character or uniqueness to them.
2. There were no witnesses to the murder, but there is a lot of _____ evidence that suggests the ex-boyfriend of the victim is guilty.
3. When he got fired from his last job, he didn't mind because he didn't like the job anyway. This time, _____, so he's quite upset.
4. I didn't like London much. _____, I was sick when I was there so that didn't help matters.
5. The bar felt a bit dodgy and I got a _____ from it, so we decided to leave straight away.
6. Amsterdam is a completely flat city, _____ Lisbon has a lot of hills.
7. When their dog died, they buried him underneath his favourite _____ of grass, where he used to curl up and sleep.
8. The restaurant is _____ in a strange way, so that diners have to go through the kitchen to get to the bathroom.
9. I spent all morning in a meeting where basically nothing _____ was said by anyone.
10. She was in a bad mood already after having a difficult day at work, and then getting into a car accident on the way home just _____ her problems.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Have you ever visited a planned city? If so, what did you think of it? If not, is there one that you would like to visit? Why or why not?
2. Have you ever had a holiday spoiled by rain? Did you go out in the rain or change your plans?
3. Do you like modern architecture? Why or why not?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. Because it was a good place to break up a long bus journey.
2. That she doesn't like the modern architecture that Brasília is famous for, and that it wasn't a good city to walk around in because everything was very spread out.
3. That because Brazil is a developing country, unlike the other two cases, a planned city like Brasília can have better infrastructure, services and safety than other cities in the country, and that planned cities are quite soulless and that is the opposite of a typical Brazilian city.

Exercises

1. sterile
2. circumstantial
3. that wasn't the case
4. Granted
5. weird vibe
6. whereas
7. patch
8. laid out
9. noteworthy
10. compounded