Chapter 3
Civicscape and Memoryscape: The First Vargas Regime and Rio de Janeiro

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In 1927, Antonio Prado Junior, the mayor of Rio de Janeiro, contracted French urbanist Alfred Agache (1875–1959) to design a master plan for the Brazilian capital city. A sweeping physical and aesthetic reform of Rio seemed within the reach of municipal authorities and their federal protectors. By the time Prado Junior received the plan’s final version, in October 1930, the enthusiasm for large-scale reform in a city that had a population of 1.1 million plus had diminished significantly. The global economic seizure that began the previous October had wreaked havoc on public and private finances, while an armed insurrection, emerging out of a breakdown in civilian powersharing arrangements, was bearing down on the capital. On paper, the so-called Plano Agache held the potential to elevate Prado Junior to the peerage of Francisco Pereira Passos, the prefect credited with the urban and sanitation reforms of Rio’s belle époque. For Agache and his team, the plan would be a major accomplishment for the cause of the Société Française D’Urbanistes and its particular style of applied sociology. However, the upheavals of 1929–30—which included continued bad economic news, the arrest of the president and Prado Junior, and the arrival of a reformist civilian-military coalition rallying behind gaúcho statesman Getúlio Vargas (1883–1954)—rendered unavailable any full-scale implementation of Agache’s plan. By 1934, Rio’s municipal authorities had formally scrapped the plan. Agache, in the meantime, had come to treat his plan as an exercise in the theories of urbanism, rather than as an actual blueprint for specific interventions into a specific city.
A victim of the overthrow of the First Republic (1889–1930) and the onset of the Vargas era, the *Plano Agache* nevertheless points to the keen awareness among urban planners and public officials of the interwar years concerning the intimate connection between the built environment and the regulated socialization of an urban citizenry. The coalition that brought down the First Republic and tabled the Frenchman’s plan still took inspiration in its predecessors’ understandings of the central state as engineer and regulator of urban space. Inspired by a vision of moralization through urban planning, the Vargas regime treated urban reform as a tool in civic improvement. The reform of the capital’s public spaces, alongside the careful management of civic time, guided Rio and its residents toward habits of civic socialibility consistent with the political goals of urbanists and the urban goals of politicians. The construction and regulated occupation of civic space, in turn, afforded the residents of Rio opportunities to make, and remake, the *civicscape* of the Vargas era.4 This chapter concentrates on the physical development of the capital city during the first Vargas regime and its attendant civic meanings.

**City Planning and “Theaters of Power”**

A close study of the *Plano Agache* proper is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is important to underscore that Agache and his team were animated by the belief that any plan to renew Rio had to address the city’s irregular urbanization, spectacular but uneven topography, and inadequate infrastructure. Drawing upon extensive statistical and observational evidence, Agache made the case that Rio required strong measures to correct shortcomings in functionality, hygiene, and grandeur.5 Agache recognized that the success of past reforms had been mixed, due to the significant engineering challenges presented by the natural environment as well as residents’ episodic resistance.6 Agache’s solution, then, was to envision a set of strategic interventions into Rio’s natural and manmade environments capable of separating and rationalizing the functionality of urban space. The plan entailed the elimination of irregular and unhealthy districts and the surgical removal of *foci* of resistance.7

At the radiant point of the newly orderly capital would be the grand *Porta do Brasil* (Gateway to Brazil), a semicircular plaza fronting Guanabara Bay. Located approximately where the Aeroporto Santos Dumont now stands, the Gateway was to be built atop landfill created by the razing of the Morro do Santo Antônio. Monumental in scale and surrounded by grand government palaces styled in art-deco