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Preserving Brazilian vernacular architecture: The need for a different approach

Preservación de la arquitectura vernácula brasileña: La necesidad de un enfoque diferente

Preservação da arquitetura vernacular Brasileira: A necessidade de uma abordagem diferente

Abstract | Resumen | Resumo

Heritage preservation has commonly focused on conserving or restoring material heritage. Technical projects are its most common tool and there is often a top-down approach to the interventions carried out. This situation frequently leads to a change in the production logic that gave rise to the architecture which they are supposed to be preserving and an expansion of urban sceneries, while causing the loss of local values and cultural traditions. An integrated approach is needed, one which seeks to preserve not only the material heritage, but also its intangible supports, thus relating the preservation of the built ensembles to that of traditional techniques, knowledge, and construction processes.

La preservación del patrimonio se ha centrado frecuentemente en la conservación y la restauración del patrimonio material. Los proyectos técnicos son su herramienta más común y a menudo existe una comprensión del tipo de intervenciones que se llevan a cabo como un proceso de arriba hacia abajo. Esta situación lleva con frecuencia a cambiar la lógica de producción que dio lugar a la arquitectura que se supone que preserva, y potencia la creación de escenografías urbanas, al tiempo que provoca la pérdida de valores locales y tradiciones culturales. Es necesario un enfoque integral, que trate de preservar no sólo el patrimonio material, sino también el inmaterial, relacionando así la preservación de los conjuntos construidos con la de las técnicas, los conocimientos y los procesos de construcción tradicionales.

A preservação do patrimônio tem-se centrado normalmente na conservação e restauro do patrimônio material. Os projectos técnicos são a sua ferramenta mais comum e existe frequentemente uma compreensão de cima para baixo do tipo de intervenções a serem realizadas. Esta situação leva frequentemente à alteração da lógica de produção que deu origem à arquitetura que eles supõem estar a preservar, e à expansão da criação de cenários urbanos, ao mesmo tempo que pode provocar a perda de valores e tradições culturais locais. É necessária uma abordagem integrada, que procure preservar não só o patrimônio material, mas também os seus suportes intangíveis, relacionando assim a preservação dos conjuntos construídos com a das técnicas, saberes e processos de construção tradicionais.

Vernacular architecture, long forgotten by academia and considered by many people to be of secondary importance, is gradually becoming a field of study in Brazil, albeit slowly. It was transmitted between generations and a model of a spontaneous and plain relationship with the land and with its inhabitants, which reflects traditional building knowledge and is influenced, in general, by sociocultural, environmental, technological, material, social, economic and political issues, as pointed out by authors such as Amos Rapoport (1969), Enrico Guidoni (1980), Paul Oliver (2006), and other important theorists of this subject. This heritage reflects not only issues related to its substance and form, but also to the societies that produced them, since vernacular architecture involves both material and intangible assets.



1: Adobe wall in Goiás, 2019
 2: *Taipa de enchimento* in the village of Iuna, Lençóis, state of Bahia (Lins and Santana 2017: 21)

Mário de Andrade's draft for the creation of a service for the protection of national monuments, which later would become the National Historical and Artistic Heritage Service (SPHAN), today named IPHAN, included a broad concept of heritage. It covered a great variety of types of heritage, such as vocabularies, songs, legends, paths, villages and vernacular architecture itself (Sant'Anna 2014: 104). Nevertheless, very little of this draft was used in the final text of the Decree-Law number 25 of November 30, 1937¹, which regulated the protection of historical and artistic heritage. In this text, national heritage was limited to movable and immovable assets linked to "memorable facts of the history of Brazil", or of "exceptional archaeological or ethnographic, bibliographic or artistic value".

Internationally, however, the field of heritage preservation underwent a great expansion during the 20th century, expressed in the different heritage preservation charters of this period. The *Venice Charter*², in 1964, incorporated urban and rural sites into the definition of "historic monument", arguing that this concept "applies not only to great works of art, but also to more modest works of the past which have acquired cultural significance with the passage of time". This new understanding allowed the patrimonialization of ensembles that largely consist of vernacular architecture – a local example is the listing of the architectural and landscape ensemble of Mucugê, in Chapada Diamantina, in 1980, an important centre of the diamond business in Bahia in the 19th century.

1: House at Ciriaco Preto Street, Lençóis, state of Bahia, 1972
 2: Residential ensemble of José Alves Campos street, Mucugê, state of Bahia, 1978 (IPHAN Digital Collection)



In Brazil, recognising these sites and this architecture as heritage was made possible by the work of important figures in the field of preservation in the 1970s. The creation of the Centro Nacional de Referência Cultural (CNRC) in 1975, under the coordination of Aloísio Magalhães, brought us closer to Mário de Andrade's unrealised concept, and sought to set up a reference for Brazilian cultural dynamics. With the incorporation of the CNRC into IPHAN, chaired by Aloísio Magalhães himself from 1979 until his death in 1982, and with the creation of the Fundação Nacional Pró-Memória (FNPM), a wider understanding of cultural assets was spread by Magalhães and started to permeate the official discourse in the field of preservation.

When considering an asset as cultural, [...] its symbolic value is emphasized, and reference is made to concepts relating to culture. The selection and use of materials, their agency, the construction and production techniques employed, the motives, all relate to the manner and conditions in which these goods are produced, in relation to a time, space, social organization, and symbolic system (Fonseca 2017: 41)³.

As Sant'Anna points out (2014: 265), the “idea was that the dynamics of cultural assets be preserved, and related to the social contexts in which they were created and served the interests of the community”. They sought to change the traditional practice of preservation, until then understood as an elitist and arbitrary practice. However, Magalhães' early death interrupted these plans. It was not until 1988 that the promulgation of the new Federal Constitution consolidated a broad and plural perspective of Brazilian identity, broadening the notion of cultural heritage. Twelve years later, policies to safeguard intangible cultural heritage finally emerged, with Decree number 3.551, of August 4, 2000.

As understood by the institution itself, the policies for safeguarding intangible heritage have given breathing space to IPHAN and to Brazilian preservation activities in general, by acknowledging the dynamism of our cultural heritage and seeking to study and record its various manifestations. However, a fluid and effective institutional dialogue between the departments that deal with the material and intangible dimensions of cultural heritage has not yet been fully achieved. Without this effective dialogue, built ensembles are preserved but in a way that completely fails to understand the wishes of the population and to value local communities and their traditional ways of producing space.

Marcia Sant'Anna had already highlighted, at the beginning of this decade, that important issues have arisen in the field of preservation due to the interaction between material and intangible heritage; she understood, back then, that it was already possible to envision “a more dynamic approach to the preservation of the material supports of heritage and a greater focus on the importance of the social base that supports it (2011: 197-198).

The interaction of material and intangible heritage helps to secure a broader and more dynamic notion of cultural heritage, as a synthesis of these aspects. One does not make sense without the other, and one cannot be fully understood without the other, although safeguarding each one of them requires different instruments and approaches (Sant'Anna 2011).

1: *Roda de Capoeira* (Capoeira Circle), registered in 2008 as a Brazilian Intangible Cultural Heritage by IPHAN and recognized in 2014 as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO (Vittorio Sciosia. Available at: <<http://www.vittoriosciosia.com/portfolio/salvador-de-bahia/>> consulted on 18/08/2020)

2: *Baianas of Acarajé* craft, registered in 2005 as a Brazilian Intangible Cultural Heritage by IPHAN (IPHAN official website: <http://portal.iphan.gov.br/pagina/detalhes/58/> (consulted on 17/08/2020)



A global, inclusive approach does not prevail yet, in spite of what the two *Fortaleza Charters* recommend. However, institutional practices for the preservation of built ensembles remain almost unchanged and focused on technical projects, and there is often an exaggerated interference by the institutions in the chosen preservation projects. This situation frequently leads to a change in the production logic that gave rise to the architecture which they are supposed to be preserving and an expansion of urban sceneries, while causing the loss of local values and cultural traditions.

In fact, until today, few authors have addressed the specificities of preserving building traditions. Paul Oliver, in a 1986 text included in *Built to meet needs: cultural issues in vernacular architecture*, published in 2006, addresses the preservation of vernacular architecture, highlighting the singularities of the relationships between communities and their built ensembles. Oliver emphasises that preservation of traditional architectural heritage cannot be understood as merely the technological methods used in preservation, but also requires cultural actions (2006, 270). Oliver also points out how a concern for preservation does not arise in all societies, but that it is often introduced by importing the cultural concepts of external societies, and that these very concepts may conflict with the values and ways of life of the very communities producing or inhabiting that heritage; and it is understood that preservation is more significant when it comes from the local community itself.

IPHAN's technicians, despite all the difficulties they face, play a fundamental role in preservation. They must avoid the complete mischaracterization of listed buildings and resist the pressures imposed by the real estate and tourism sectors. However, there is a need for a change in current preservation practices. Societies must have an active role in this process –in both the selection and safeguarding of cultural assets – so that preservation becomes increasingly engaged with the community and thereby reinforced.

The Brazilian practice of preservation often misunderstands the dynamics of a cultural asset and the continuity that keeps the asset alive. It has often caused the “freezing” of a particular set of buildings and ensembles in order to preserve a certain configuration of the built heritage or to help promote tourism, but these priorities are not always aligned with the interests of the community. There is a clear need to consider and discuss alternative approaches to preservation which encompass all or most of the values involved. Otherwise, patrimonialization and the activity of preservation can even harm intrinsic relationships between cultural assets and the community, driving it away from its own heritage and therefore making it meaningless. An integrated approach is needed, one which seeks to preserve not only the material heritage, but also its intangible supports, thus relating the preservation of the built ensembles to that of techniques,



Santa Isabel Mother Church,
Mucugê, state of Bahia

knowledge and construction processes, without which they would become incoherent. This is in line with Oliver's statement that "[...] if there is to be a future for conservation, we need to conserve the technology and the methods of building, the skills and the 'wrinkles' as well as the structures themselves" (2006: 283).

¹ Regulation for the protection of national historical and artistic heritage, available at: http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/decreto-lei/del0025.htm (consulted on 17/08/2020).

² *International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites*, available at: https://www.icomos.org/charters/venice_e.pdf (consulted on 17/08/2020).

³ All quotes in this article have been translated to English by the author.

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Biography | Biografía | Biografia

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He is a Master's student at the Postgraduate Program in Architecture and Urbanism at the Universidade Federal da Bahia (PPG-AU/UFBA), with a focus on Conservation and Restoration, and a member of the "Arquitetura popular: espaços e saberes" and "Barroco Ibero-Americano: Arquitetura e Cidade" research groups. He was a visiting student (2014-2015) at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) in Chicago, with a scholarship granted by the CAPES Foundation through the Science Without Borders program.



Residential ensemble of Dr. Rodrigues, Lima street, Mucugê, state of Bahia