

Retrieving the Past: The Colonial House in Rio de Janeiro (1767–1822)

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Brazilian houses have been studied since the beginning of the 20th century. Until the 19th century, all that was written about Brazilian home architecture were occasional descriptions in letters and travel records of Europeans who traveled to Brazil in the colonial period, most of them only for a short time before proceeding to their ultimate destination. Rio de Janeiro, a major port in the southern Atlantic and capital city since 1763, is object of many of those descriptions¹. The number of foreign visitors increased with the political and economical changes brought by the arrival of the Portuguese royal family in 1808.

The remarks of those chroniclers, most of which were *not architects or engineers*, are consistent with each other, and their tone is one of reproach. Criticism about traditional homes and lack of good hygienic conditions is a consequence of the criticism about urban life, motivated by the advances of technical knowledge and industrialization, whose effects, which began in the last decades of the previous century, were more intensely felt in the 19th century and led to major changes in daily life. Too fast urbanization and increasing population density caused sanitary problems whose solution was urgent in the first years of the 19th century. It cannot be stated that Brazil remained unchanged, but major transformations brought by industrialization would only occur in the 20th century.

Some aspects of the Brazilian house are repeatedly mentioned in the reports of the travelers. First point is the uniform appearance of the buildings. French engineer Vauthier imputes this uniformity to the narrow and deep lots of land, which allowed little formal variety. He even said that "who saw a Brazilian house, saw almost all of them"². Another

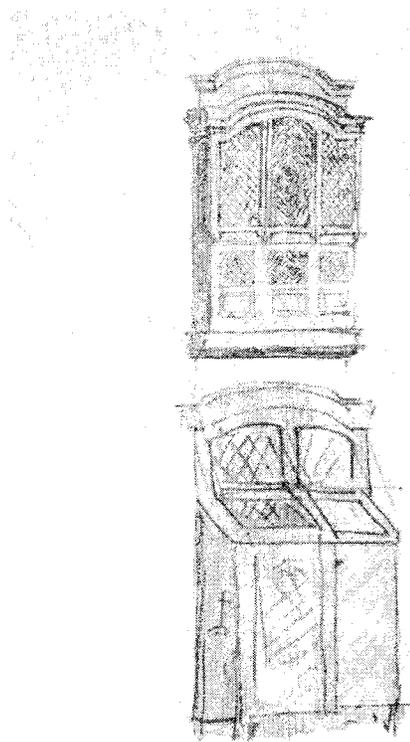
consequence of that kind of plot was lack of salubrity. Houses were said to be dark and oppressive, with parts untouched by daylight.

Absence of sanitary facilities was accounted for, although few of those existed in Europe at that time. Water supply and used water disposal depended on slave work. *Rótulas e muxarabis* are frequently mentioned exotic elements, and women's seclusion is fiercely denounced (fig.1).

Brazilian homes are considered simple ones, endowed with only basic comfort, lacking decorative refinements³. These accounts are recurrent, and could refer to any place of the country. It should be mentioned that they are repeated to this day without further discussion regarding their accuracy.

Theoretical studies on architecture and urbanism in Brazil began at the 1920s, as the discussions in the field of plastic arts spread out. Paradoxically, discussions on Brazilian architecture and cities served both to the construction of a new profession and to the efforts of building a national identity.

Criticism on the colonial city gave rise to the new ways of dwelling allowed by growing urbanization and industrialization. Actions like the great urban surgery performed in Rio de Janeiro by mayor Pereira Passos and the moving of the Minas Gerais state capital city to the modern Belo Horizonte were justified by the sanitary and traffic problems of the traditional cities. It must be reminded that built environment serves as strong cultural and emotional reference to man, and major changes tend to provoke powerful reaction. Attacking the traditional urban fabric strikes the colonial past and gives way to the emergence of a modern country in which new labor relations overcome the slavery



628. *Enfiteuticis p[ro]prietatibus*

Fig. 1 – Rótula and Muxarabi

Thomas Ender, in FERREZ, Gilberto. *O Velho Rio de Janeiro através das gravuras de Thomas Ender*

past and allow the birth of a new society.

Dwelling is another aspect of the modernization of the country which demands reflection and action. The problem of the dwelling of the poor classes began with the occupation of the Rio de Janeiro hills by freed slaves and poor workers. Abolition of slavery (1888) and interventions in Rio de Janeiro⁴ worsened this problem, along with the growth brought by industrialization. Brazilian architects adhered to the concept of vertical dwelling, and produced samples of high esthetical and technical quality. But how to convince the users of the benefits of changing? Once more, tradition had to be disqualified. Criticism on the poor illumination, hygiene and ventilation was reinforced. Building technique based on handicraft was considered outdated, unsuitable when compared with industrial technology, which permitted a higher building pattern with less money and time.

On the other hand, the importance of built space as an unifying factor was not ignored, and was explored in the construction of a national identity. A paradoxical situation was reached, in which the past was to be denied and surpassed, but also an essential element of identity and unity. In this context, the *Serviço de Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional* (National Trust for Historical and Artistic Preservation) was created in 1938, and its goal was to separate the wheat from the tare, deciding what should be preserved and what could be destroyed.

The first listing of monuments gave rise to a more systematical reflection on Brazilian architecture. Our patrimony was catalogued, and much was written on the issue⁵. It is true that interest was placed upon more academic buildings, mainly churches, fortresses and noble homes. The vast majority of the buildings, as usual in history of architecture, was not given proper attention.

An interesting fact is that the studies on the Brazilian house refer to an almost universal type-house, built on a standard lot, to be found all over the country. This model of house is repeated in every text and is well known to every Brazilian architect. It is built in the limits of the lot, with the living room in the front, the corridor on the side, successive alcoves where sun light does not get in, kitchen and dining room in the back. However, it is not objectively exemplified in the classics on the subject, being a collage of all houses which each one saw and transmitted in classrooms, lectures and talkings.

In general, the affiliation of the Brazilian architecture to the Portuguese one is recognized. Native and African influence is admitted, but has never been explored. It is consensual that the typology of Northern Portugal preponderates, since this area, especially Entredouro e Minho, yielded the most significant migrating flux. Nevertheless, little was done to identify these typologies properly and describe how they were adapted to Brazilian conditions. In the 1950s, studies on regional houses, mainly rural architecture, began to appear. It is possible to find very old rural houses, which are difficult to find in cities exposed to intense growth and real estate business. Besides, there is a certain amount of disbelief about the two first centuries of urbanization. Our first towns are considered small, unimportant, almost as ghost towns, since the owners preferred to live in the countryside, where their business was.

This picture only began to change with the discovery of gold in Minas Gerais in the 18th century, which led to the development of an "urban civilization".

Rio de Janeiro escapes the scope of regional studies because of its condition of national capital city for almost two centuries. Denise Cabral Stuckenbruck⁶ says, quoting José Honório Rodrigues, that Rio de Janeiro became "a symbol of *Brazilian universality*". We believe that Rio de Janeiro *was modeled as*, rather than *became*, a symbol of Brazil. Political use of the image of the city as the mirror of a modern and civilized country in the Republican period, especially the first years of the 20th century, has been well studied. That was the time of the major urban surgeries, which virtually eradicated colonial aspects of the city, erasing the colonial house both physically and in the memory. Colonial Rio de Janeiro dwelling is treated in a peripheral manner in the architectural studies, which refer to the 19th-century buildings as "ancient", and do not detach from the generally established model of Brazilian home.

As we began this research, very little was known about the colonial house of Rio de Janeiro. It was the great absent of Brazilian home architecture literature, to a great extent because of the destruction of the urban fabric in the remodeling of the beginning of the 20th century. In the lack of architectural samples, reconstitution of Rio de Janeiro dwelling in the colonial period is only possible by means of written and iconographical documents.

The documents on which our research was based were the judicial evaluations found in 82 *post-mortem* inventories (1767-1850) stored in the *Arquivo Nacional do Rio de Janeiro*, which offered us an unique opportunity of elucidating still unexplored aspects of the Rio de Janeiro domestic architecture. Around half of the 300 inventoried buildings belonged to great traders of Rio de Janeiro. Other proprietors were smaller traders, lawyers and craftsmen.

Real estate market was a safe option for diversification of investment at colonial times, and afforded prestige. We observed that safety offered by real estate was means family protection. The rent was frequently destined to the sustenance of people who could not work, such as women in convent, minors and mentally ill. Real estate also accounted for the payment of the *terças*⁷ and the execution of the last will of the deceased.

The evaluators were masons and carpenters nominated by the municipal council for a one-year term. We found professionals who were active for more than twenty years. A progressive elaboration of a working method and a refinement of the technical language of the descriptions is perceived. The information on the evaluation reports became thus more consistent and complete, enabling a statistical treatment of the gathered data.

One-story houses preponderate in the inventories, making up 73.40% of the samples. Only eight empty lots were found in the ancient urban core, which is consistent with the increasing population density endured by the city upon the arrival of the Portuguese royal court. The first information obtained in the reports concerns dimensional characteristics of the buildings. It was possible to determine the dimensions of the urban lots in Rio de Janeiro, which averaged 6.07m of frontage and 23.84m of depth. This pattern of land division is compatible with the one established for Portuguese cities⁸ as frontage is concerned, but the lots were deeper in Rio de Janeiro, which is due to open frontiers and high availability of land. Buildings with frontage larger than depth, typical of Portuguese nobility, are seldom found at that time.

Occupation rate of the plots averaged 82.17%. In two- and three-story buildings this rate was found to be higher, with almost total occupation of the lot, leaving only free space for ventilation wells. One-story houses presented large courtyards, although the average free surface was only 7.13m².

As building technique is concerned, a great variety of materials and techniques was discovered, mainly in the peripheral rural areas later incorporated by the city. In the urban core itself, most buildings had walls of stone and lime, with *briqueté-entre-poteaux*. Wattle and daub and stucco walls appear occasionally as partitions, especially on the upper floor of the two-story houses, where it was desirable to minimize the weight to be supported by the ground-floor structure.

Evaluation reports allowed us to enter the houses of Rio de Janeiro and apprehend their inner division. Although the dimensions of the rooms are not included in the reports, their use and disposition is known, since the descriptions accompany the evaluator as he comes in the house, from the street to the back. At this point, it was necessary to

choose a methodological procedure which permitted the grouping, classification and analysis of the data. Type and typological process were the basic operative elements of the analysis. To develop our interpretation of Rio de Janeiro house, we used the methodology for the study of historical typologies due to Caniggia and Maffei⁹.

Typologies are an important instrument to the comprehension of the vernacular architecture. The forms of traditional architecture are originated by cultural processes rather than esthetical judgement. They assume an adequacy between building technique and intended spatial disposition, and the agreement of the users and builders on the product to be obtained. Type is legitimated by the social group. Tradition and behavior principles dictate spatial organization, and there is a persistence and constancy of the plan and façade. Well known materials and building techniques are preferably used. Built space is a strong communication element, codifying behavior and making interdicts explicit.

At times of changing, there is a tendency of reproducing familiar forms and schemata. This is the case of immigrants, who seek to reconstruct in their destination the traditional home of their birthplace. These reconstructions cannot be always literal. There are often limitations of a practical nature, such as availability of building materials, topography and climatic conditions, which can make some typologies unfeasible. Transposition of European models to American colonies should be studied taking into account the necessary adaptations, concerning climate and available materials, as well as integration of people with different cultural heritage.

It is certain that in the colonization of the Americas Europeans, Natives and Africans interacted to forge new cultural dwelling patterns, as it is undeniable that the Brazilian house closely resembles the Portuguese one. This subtle cultural interaction explains the difficulty faced by many scholars as they tried to identify in Portugal the Brazilian typologies.

In the 1950s a new line of analysis arose in Italy, based on the vision of the construction as a historical determination and in the comprehension that types in their progressive transformation give form to a typological process, determined in each moment and place, leading to the concept of historical typology.

The method developed by Caniggia is based on the specificity of the typological process at each time and place. The reading of the built environment can be achieved through the analysis of its formation, using logical instruments intrinsic to its structure. These instruments are deducible from the structures themselves by means of the identification of their elemental matrices.

There is a basic type: the monocellular house of undifferentiated use, serving both for dwelling and for working, with a square ground plan, only one opening to the exterior, and one story. Typological evolution occurs by the duplication of this basic cell, either in height or in depth, giving rise to more complex types (fig. 2). In this derivation process, each type is explained by its predecessor and successor. The progressive emergence of more complex structures is obtained by specialization of the simpler ones.

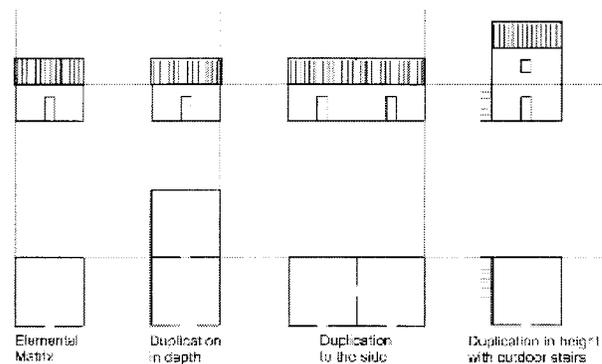


Fig. 2 - Duplication of the elemental matrix

Therefore, we decided to classify the buildings found in the inventories according to their programs and number of rooms. This simple criterion allowed a better comprehension of the Rio de Janeiro houses, as well as a comparison with the established typologies of the Brazilian house.

Treatment of the material led to the identification of a great variety of programs, contradicting the general image of uniformity of the Brazilian house proposed by specialized literature.

It has been stated that urban real estate was one of the most important ways in which the elite invested

its money, being most of the buildings allotted to rental. Some proprietors even had their own teams of slave builders, and could produce some of the building material, like bricks. Investors bought or were granted large amounts of land, which could account for a whole block. Houses could be built one by one, or, if the owner could afford to, all at once. In this instance, the original lot was divided into several similar lots, which were to be occupied by similar houses. This serial building produced sequences of houses with same program, façade and very similar dimensions.

As functional areas are concerned, the classical division of the Brazilian house into entertaining, family and privacy, and service sectors was confirmed. Social sector was always turned to the street, the family and privacy sector in the middle of the house and the services in the back, where there was generally a courtyard. (Fig.3)

Social sector is stable in all one-story typologies. In these houses, the service sector is the first one to expand. Kitchens are not always present, leading to the hypothesis that some houses were rented to several tenants, who must eat in the many boarding houses which existed in the city.

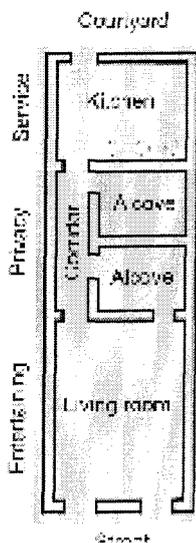


Fig. 3 - Functional areas

Dining rooms, usually considered as the intersection between the social and private sectors, appear in the service sector, beside kitchens, pantries and verandas. This picture also presents itself in the two-

story houses, and it was not possible to identify the moment when dining rooms migrated to the social sector of the house.

Family and privacy sector was generally composed by a module of two alcoves, one of which might serve as an office. This module was replicated in larger houses, and was always situated in the middle part of the building (Fig. 4).

Another trace characteristic of the Brazilian house according to the literature was surprisingly absent: the corridor. Regarded as a fundamental linking element in the narrow and deep lots, the corridor very seldom appeared in the descriptions. Internal circulation was achieved through the aligned compartments which opened one into another.

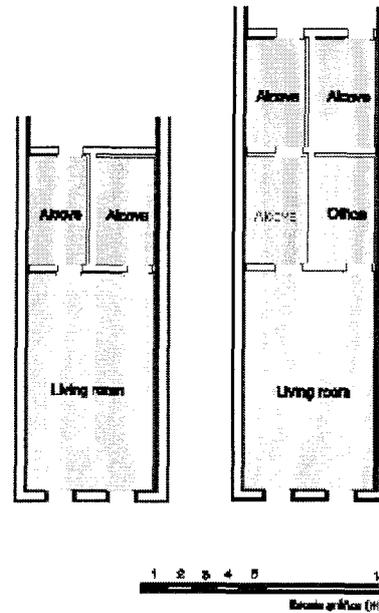


Fig. 4- The two alcoves module

As a matter of fact, the corridor was a flux controller, restricting access to the private rooms of the house by undesired people. In many cases, the corridor was not a substitute to the opening of the rooms one into another, but both systems coexisted. Rather than negligence with intimacy, the opening of one room into another is an instrument for its control, which appears to be motivated by the variable composition of Brazilian homes¹⁰, in which cohabited not only close relatives, but also slaves, farther relatives and *protegés*.

It was in the two- and three-story houses that

formal variations were more abundant, making impossible a classification based on the programs. Many of these buildings presented the classical division: commercial ground floor (at least partially), and residential upper floors. Many-story typologies mean a more intense land use, multiplying the built area. Some of these buildings had their profitability increased by the rental to multiple tenants: in one instance, we found a building to be rented by ten different people at one time.

Regarding program evolution, two- and three-story houses were characterized by the enlargement of the social area, with the multiplication and specialization of the rooms. This sector, unchanged in the houses of the lower social ranks, became more important in the houses of the elite in the context of the arrival of the Portuguese royal family in 1808.

A new image of the colonial house emerged after this research. Far from the great academic buildings which have been thoroughly studied, the house which composed most of the urban fabric and sheltered most of the population with no access to real estate ownership began to be understood in its form and dimensions. By means of written documents, not usual in architectural research, it was possible to reconstitute a lost patrimony, and to advance in the comprehension of the dwelling forms in Rio de Janeiro

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NOTES

- ¹ FRANÇA: 1999 e 2000.
- ² VAUTHIER, 1943, p.143.
- ³ ALGRANTI: 1998, p. 98-112.
- ⁴ DEL BRENNIA: 1985. BENCHIMOL:1982.
- ⁵ A Revista do Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional foi um importante veículo de publicação dessa produção teórica.
- ⁶ STUCKENBRUCK :1996,p. 30.
- ⁷ By Portuguese law, people had the right to freely dispose of the third part (terça) of their property, by means of a will.
- ⁸ CARITA : 1999 ; CONCEIÇÃO : 2002 ; FERNANDES:1989;TEIXEIRA: 1999.
- ⁹ CANIGGIA e MAFFEI: 1995.
- ¹⁰ ALGRANTI: 1998, p.85- 87.