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Looking at Collaboration as a Key to Creative Expression: The Case of Colonial Architecture

June D. Komisar

- 1 Architecture is often seen as the result of the creative process of one architect. While a convenient way of labeling or defining a style or an influence, this conceit can only hinder the understanding of how collaboration is a significant aspect of creative expression in architecture. In addition, the simplified model of this conceit leaves little room for investigating multiple influences from different traditions of architectural expression since the presumption is that all is funneled through the sensibility of one master from one background. This is particularly problematic under colonial conditions where more than one knowledge base converges, often revealed in a hybridized architecture.

In light of these two issues, collaboration and the combination of ideas and influences, it can be seen that tracing the many players in the design and construction process can reveal the sources of hybridized form and multiple meanings for the different inhabitants of colonial space. Tracing the work of many players reveals collaboration, apprenticeships and other associations between artists, artisans, builders and architects that can foster the dissemination of information and multicultural production.

The case discussed here is the architecture of the eighteenth-century mining region of Minas Gerais, Brazil, built when Brazil was a Portuguese colony. This architecture provides a special interest because of at least these three factors:

1) In the popular literature, one figure, Antônio Francisco Lisboa, known as Aleijadinho, stands as the star architect of eighteenth-century Brazil. Lisboa's talents reached almost mythic proportions, while all other contributors' work was de-emphasized. Although others also figured in the developments attributed primarily to Lisboa, the buildings attributed to him, as well as other stylistically similar projects have been grouped under the labels "*estilo Aleijadinho*," implying sole authorship, as well as a more general term, "Borrominesque." Both terms refer to a stylistic break from the rectilinear

buildings that predominated from the earliest Portuguese colonization to the eighteenth century, and instead exhibit curvilinear forms. The collaborations traced below explain the spread of aspects of this stylistic innovation, providing the groundwork for further discussion.

2) Some scholars have considered that any distinct architectural expression in this region was thought to be a result of isolation from the mother idiom (assumed to be Portugal), not from hybridization or collaboration.¹ More recently, researchers have noted what the local folklore has long recognized: Mineiro culture (culture from Minas Gerais), including the architecture, was a mixture of Portuguese and both African and Afro-Brazilian.²

3) Mineiro colonial architecture was crafted and designed by African slaves and former slaves as well as Portuguese immigrants and descendants from all of these groups.³ Consequently, the result is a cross-cultural hybridization. This can be revealed, not only by looking at the physical evidence, but also by teasing out the identities of artists, architects, artisans, and builders. Sources for architectural ideas, forms, and techniques included Northern Portugal, Lisbon, the training of Portuguese military engineers, coastal Brazil, Africa, and a generation of locals (Mineiros). In addition, European books and prints were constantly arriving to this region. By looking at collaboration between this variety of players and influences, the hybridized architectural form and its sources are revealed.

Methodology

- 2 The methodology behind revealing collaborations and collegial exchanges of information and ideas for this investigation included the creation of a matrix, charting collaborative efforts and other alliances for a sample of significant buildings in the region. This information about the players and the product of these labors came from payment records, wills, and other documents from the end of the colonial period as well as information gathered by other scholars.⁴ This complex matrix tracked when an artist/architect was working (time), what building they worked on (project), and the particular contribution (task). Overlapping time spans when various players worked on the same building became evident in this way. In this study, some collaborations were easily revealed, explicitly detailed in written records. However, other relationships could be detected only through charting intervals and projects. For some buildings, there was a scarcity of information. In addition, some artisans, who did not lead ateliers for various reasons, were often not mentioned at all. These factors meant that some relationships were never completely resolved. Other information however, provides a key to the larger picture of what was occurring in these settlements.

There is, in this investigation, an assumption about an inevitable exchange of ideas through contact and collaboration. For example, usually four project overseers were appointed at one time to inspect construction progress and quality. It is assumed that these professionals discussed the work together and formed some types of collegial relationships and exchanges of ideas and skills.

The following traces some of the players responsible for the design and construction of four buildings in Minas Gerais, three in the city of Ouro Preto and one in São João del Rei. Even in this small sample, patterns of information transfer and collaboration emerge. The construction of these churches can be likened to a competition by different congregations (religious brotherhoods) to build the most impressive building.

Naturally, the most talented artisans were recruited for this task, so it is not surprising that these artists jumped from one project to the next. Tracing their activity reveals a complex and confusing web of inter-relationships.

The Church of Nossa Senhora do Rosário

- 3 Nossa Senhora do Rosário church in Ouro Preto (fig. 1), is one of the earliest of Minas Gerais's "Borrominesque" churches.⁵



Fig. 1: The church of Nossa Senhora do Rosário, Ouro Preto, Minas Gerais, Brazil, © June Komisar.

- 4 The plan is a double oval, a theme carried throughout the composition, from the shape of the roof to the curve of the façade. Most notable are the two bell towers, so integrated into Rosário's curving façade they have lost their character as distinct elements. Small circular windows punch through each tower wall and larger circular openings provide light to the upper portion of the interior. All these elements complete a unified expression of the oval nave.

The first general contractor, José Pereira dos Santos, was born near Porto, Portugal. In his will, Santos named a number of the team for the Rosario project.⁶ Among them were João Monjolo and Carniceiro João, African or Afro-Brazilian artisans, Antônio de Souza Calheiros, possibly from Coimbra, Portugal, and José Pereira Arouca, a Portuguese mason from the Porto region. Of interest here is that Arouca was quite involved with the construction of two neighboring Ouro Preto churches (São Francisco and Nossa Senhora do Carmo) and it may have been the collaboration with Afro-Brazilians and Coimbra immigrants that contributed to the ideas he spread.

The Church of Nossa Senhora do Carmo

- 5 The design of the church of Nossa Senhora do Carmo is completely rectilinear in plan except for convex belltowers and front façade (fig. 2).



Fig. 2: The church of Nossa Senhora do Carmo Ouro Preto, Minas Gerais, Brazil, © June Komisar.

- 6 Carmo's façade curves may have been inspired by Rosário's ovals, for modifications to the original rectilinear design were undertaken when the Rosário was already under construction. Justification for this speculation include, for one, the fact that Carmo's original designer never used curves.⁷ In addition, Carmo's curves are an embellishment to a few areas rather than central to the design, indicating that they may not have been part of the initial design. Furthermore, Arouca, the Rosário mason, was hired to work on the Carmo construction, and his expertise in curvilinear construction from the Rosário project was probably useful in the Carmo's construction. Of course, other Carmo artisans could also witness the remarkable double oval plan of the Rosário, under construction nearby. For that matter, they could also not ignore the innovative São Francisco church, just across the plaza.

Changes to the original design of the Carmelite church were promoted by project overseers Domingos Oliveira and Francisco de Lima Cerqueira, but conceived of by João Viana, the master stonemason hired upon the death of the original architect.⁸ If his modifications were the curves we can see in the façade, it was perhaps enabled by the expertise of Arouca, a builder of the Rosário church. Oliveira and Cerqueira, worked not only with Viana and Arouca on the curved elements of Carmo but also worked on other projects with Antônio Francisco Lisboa—whose nickname "*Aleijadinho*" defines the style.

The Churches of São Francisco in Ouro Preto and São João del Rei

- 7 Both churches of São Francisco are noted for design experimentation. In Ouro Preto it is the dynamic front façade that is most striking, providing considerable architectural innovation through the use of dramatic reverse curves integrating recessed bell towers with the colossal engaged columns framing the façade and creating a sense of movement (fig. 3).



Fig. 3: The church of São Francisco de Assis, Ouro Preto, Minas Gerais, Brazil, © June Komisar.

- 8 While Antônio Francisco Lisboa is credited with the design, it is not surprising that José Ribeiro Carvalhaes, the mason responsible for the curved pediment of the Rosário church helped build this curvilinear Franciscan church. The above mentioned Cerqueira worked with Lisboa as overseer. Another overseer was Arouca, who worked on both Carmo and Rosário.⁹ Lisboa and Cerqueira also worked on the São Francisco church in the town of São João del Rei (fig. 4).



Fig. 4: The church of São Francisco de Assis, São João del Rei, Minas Gerais, Brazil, © June Komisar.

- 9 Lisboa's involvement is poorly documented, but Cerqueira was a major designer, sculptor, and contractor/builder for this church. Although they were far apart, Cerqueira traveled back and forth between the two projects.

In São João del Rei, the construction process must have been a matter of tremendous interest. On one occasion, when Cerqueira returned, he destroyed completed work and rebuilt it. The results were a church with curvilinear lateral walls and belltowers integrated into the front façade. Surrounding the entry door was a frontispiece similar to those of the Carmo and the São Francisco of Ouro Preto. This is all evidence that Cerqueira's vision was influenced by the "Borrominesque" churches of Ouro Preto, particularly the three described above.

Conclusion

- 10 Through the matrix of project, time, and task for the various artisans, it was possible to begin to see a flow of ideas between projects. We have not only the physical evidence of stylistic similarities, but also a web of relationships and influences. The adoption of such a methodology can contribute to a more robust understanding of how particular architectural innovations were developed.

The broadening of the curriculum in architectural education to include non-western traditions, postcolonial discourse, and critical regionalism demands a reframing of the way architecture is analyzed and discussed. The case presented here is a step towards this change, where architecture is not regarded as the brainchild of a genius-hero designer, but as a culmination of many influences and efforts. This can be seen to reveal more about the origins of various ideas than the hero model, which conceals

much that is significant about form making in architecture under multicultural conditions.

ENDNOTES

1. Robert C. SMITH, JR., "The Colonial Architecture of Minas Gerais in Brazil," *Art Bulletin*, 21, no. 2 (June 1939), 110. Robert C. SMITH, JR., "The Arts in Brazil (i) Baroque Architecture," in *Portugal and Brazil, an Introduction*, ed. H. V. Livermore, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1953, p.365.
2. John BURY, "The Twelve Prophets at Congonhas do Campo," *The Month* 2, no. 3 (September 1949), pp. 156–157.
3. Churches built for an African and Afro-Brazilian population include the churches of the Rosário (Nossa Senhora do Rosário) in Ouro Preto and Mariana, Minas Gerais and the church of Santa Efigênia in Ouro Preto.
4. Notable among these scholars were Germain Bazin and Judith Martins.
5. Nossa Senhora do Rosário church. Arquivo Historico Ultramarino, Lisbon. Ultra-Brasil/MG–Caixa.:25, 1743–1755.
6. José Pereira DOS SANTOS, "Testamento com que faleceu José Pereira dos Santos," in *Anuario do Museu da Inconfidencia*, Year III, Ouro Preto, DPHAN, 1954.
7. Manoel Lisboa, father of Antônio Francisco Lisboa.
8. Francisco Antônio LOPES, *Historia da Construção da Igreja do Carmo*, Rio de Janeiro, DPHAN, 1942, pp. 25–26.
9. Judith MARTINS, *Dicionario de Artistas e Artifices dos Seculos XVIII e XIX em Minas Gerais*, Rio de Janeiro, IPHAN, 1974, 175–179. Revista Arquivo Publico Mineiro, RAPM January–March 1896 Fas. 1 #1 pp. 165–167.

ABSTRACTS

Architecture is all too often seen as the result of the creative process of one architect. While this is convenient, it does not provide a complete picture. Not only does the model of a sole, master architect tell only a partial story, but also this conceit can hinder the understanding of design processes, intention, and meaning. Discussed here are the results of a methodology used to tease out sources of the various elements that were combined into a fusion of ideas and techniques in the case of church architecture in Minas Gerais, Brazil, during the end of the colonial period. This investigation revealed collaborations and collegial exchanges of information and ideas in this society comprised of people born in Portugal, Africa, and Brazil. This seeks to contribute to a more robust understanding of how particular architectural innovations were developed. In addition, this paper seeks to develop ways to challenge the notion that architecture is the result of one master designer.

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Mots-clés: architecture coloniale, collaboration

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Chronological index: Epoque moderne, XVIIIe siècle

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