Our historical architecture has yet to be adequately studied. Even though some have written on the primary churches and convents – small efforts, incidentally, and for the most part centered around the work of Antonio Francisco Lisboa, whose personality has begun to attract deserved attention – nothing or almost nothing has been done in relation to civic architecture, and housing, in particular. Understandably, then, a less than rigorous assessment of our historical architecture once in a while does surface. Recently, a citation in an article titled “The Architecture in Brazil” claimed that “…individual houses are worthless as works of architecture…,” followed by Aníbal Matos’s supporting observation, “all houses having been built by uncultured Portuguese, who brought from their villages the disproportionate and somber type of their traditional constructions.”

Now then, popular architecture in Portugal, in our view, is of greater interest than “erudite” architecture – using here, for lack of a better term, Mário de Andrade’s expression to distinguish the art of the people from that of the scholarly. It is in the villages and the vigor of their rural constructions, both rough and welcoming, that the qualities of a race are best shown. Free of the affected and at times pedantic airs it assumes when refined, popular architecture takes shape naturally at will, revealing in the precision of its proportions and in the absence of makeup, a perfect aesthetic health, so to speak.

Characteristics such as these, brought along to our country individually by the old, “uncultured” master builders and masons, far from signifying a bad beginning, lent early on and on the contrary, an unpretentious and pure quality to Portuguese architecture in the colony, which it was able to keep until the mid nineteenth century, in spite of the vicissitudes it suffered.

In this instance, the “softening” noted by Gilberto Freyre can undoubtedly be seen, the architecture having lost, due to the compromises of environmental adaptation, some of that typically Portuguese carrure, but in compensation, due to simpler customs and colonial life’s greater largesse, and influenced as well, perhaps, by the grandiosity of the American landscape, certain precious and somewhat snotty mannerisms found there were never replicated here. Material difficulties of all kinds largely contributed to this, among them the labor, by its nature inexperienced, of natives and blacks: Indians, used to a different economy affording them the leisure for the sharp and careful fabrication of arms, tools, and ornaments, certainly found strange the rough and rushed workmanship of impatient whites. Over time, blacks proved to be skillful artists in the different crafts, showing even a certain “virtuosity,” somewhat academic and much to European taste –
which recalls for us older works, when the fair-skinned and handsome barbarian of the north clumsily interpreted the novelty of acanthus leaves in his first contacts with Latin civilization or, later, striving to translate, still with a harsh and gothic accent, rediscovered Greco-Roman motifs. In both, there is the same manner of someone discovering something new without having quite yet understood it correctly, without a shred of maîtrise, but with plenty of artistic will, along with a sense of revelation that, in one or the other, eventually disappears with the refinement of their technique. Lastly, distance as well as necessities of different and more urgent sorts also contributed to a greater differentiation, keeping in mind the delay that local realizations have in relation to the metropolis and, in general, the marked uninterest in innovation of all kinds.

Our house thus appears almost always unadorned and poor compared to the opulence of Italian palazzi and ville, castles of France, or English mansions of the same period; or to the rich and vain appearance of many Hispano-American manor houses; or even to the palatial and coquettish aspect of certain noble Portuguese residences. However, to state that it does not have value as a work of architecture is a declaration that in no way corresponds to reality.

There would be an interest, therefore, in knowing it better, not just to avoid the replication of similar frivolities and misconceptions – which would grant them undue importance – but in order to offer to those who have been for some time now committed to studying more closely all that is ours, while sympathetically addressing things that have commonly been despised or even deliberately concealed, the opportunity to use it as new research material, and to also ensure that we modern architects take advantage of the lessons of over three hundred years of experience, so as not to reproduce an aspect already dead.

Work ought to be done, if not by a professional, then at least with his assistance, in order to ensure a technical precision and objectivity, without which it would lose its purpose. And this study should not be limited to the apparently more likable houses of the first half of the nineteenth century, as has been the case to date – largely because some aspects of family life from that period are better known – but include as well the eighteenth-century house, and even the vestiges of that of the seventeenth century when, harsh as life was, contrasts were sharper, and in terms of architecture proper, it prompts greater interest. Nor should one concentrate only on plantation houses or on the townhouses with seven, nine, or fifteen windows and a door right in the middle, but on the smaller houses, rather, with three, four, and even five balconies, a door to the side, and less formal appearance. There are the more petit bourgeois houses, like those that can still be found in the old cities of Minas Gerais, all having similar entrance halls where stairs first offer a few inviting steps and are soon hidden, half enclosed, in between the walls. There are also the little, single-story houses lining the streets, small in the front, very deep, and simply gabled. Lest we forget, there is finally the colonist’s “minimum” house, as it is now called, which is of all other houses – it is important to note – the only one that continues to be “alive” throughout the country despite having so fragile an aspect. It appears on the side of the road when one leaves the city, just outside Petropolis, right next to the more picturesque summerhouses. Built of tree limbs from the nearest woods and mud, much like an animal enclosure, it shelters an entire family – infants, little boys, young women, elders, all brought together along with their air of sickness and inertia and waiting… (the capitalist neighbor – fit, “aerodynamic,” and a good Catholic –
has only one concern: what will the tourists say?). And nobody pays attention, so common has this become, because “that” is as much a part of the earth as an anthill, a wild fig tree, and a corn stalk – as an extension of the ground itself… but it is precisely because they are an intrinsic part of the ground that such houses have for us architects a certain respectability and dignity, whereas the “pseudo-mission, Norman, or colonial,” houses next to them are no more than poorly handled imitations.

Besides, the ingenious manner in which they are made – using mud reinforced with wood – has something of our reinforced concrete about it, and, with due precautions, the same tactics should be adopted for summerhouses and low-cost constructions in general, such as raising the floor from the ground and whitewashing walls to avoid humidity and “kissing bugs.” That is what we tried to do in the workers’ town of Monlevade near Sabará, at the behest of The Belgian and Minas Gerais Metallurgic Company – a project that was not taken seriously, as one can imagine.

Nevertheless, this study should closely examine the various systems and building processes, the different plan solutions, and how they vary from one region to another, while, in each case, looking to determine the reasons – whether programmatic, technical, or otherwise – as to why a house was done in this or that way, such as the roofs, which, so simple in their design over the main body, spread – like chicken wings – to cover porches, additions, and such, avoiding dormers and never using the type of mansard so fashionable in the metropolis, but always preserving the unmistakable profile of the Portuguese roof and even showing in some of the enormous mill and plantation house roof structures – as seen in engravings of the period – a looser and extended line, contributing much to that impression of sleepiness they often give; ceilings clad in camisa e saia boards that follow the framework’s profile; window and door frames with their respective hardware, featuring the usual models – paneled doors and guillotine windows with safety leaves and protective jalousies – Venetian blinds appearing only in the nineteenth century; and furniture, from the rougher furniture of early times to the “Thonet” caned chairs – or “Austrians,” as they were usually called – that appeared at the end of the Empire, pretty and comfortable, gaining popularity to the despair of refined taste and replacing a whole series of splendid pieces in jacaranda wood that can still be found in antiquaries.

An examination undertaken in less haste would lead to intriguing observations that counter current beliefs and support the practice of modern architecture, observations that would indeed show how the latter can be viewed as the continuation of a normal evolution. It is commonly believed, for instance, that the eaves of our old houses were meant to provide protection from the sun when the truth is quite different. A simple section shows how in most cases such protection would have been insufficient, though it never occurred to good master builders. In the rain, however, the curtain of water pouring from the roof is held off from the walls.

Later, with the appearance of gutters, roof parapets were logically and gradually adopted, extending the cornice – now without purpose – and stuck to the wall somewhat clumsily and by force of habit until the transformation was complete with the advent of garden roof-terraces. Proof that only rarely did eaves have other purposes lies in California, Mexico, Morocco, etc., where there is plenty of sun but rain is scarce, and eaves, when they exist, consist in most cases of a single roof tile.
It is also commonly believed that early builders gave their walls an excessive thickness not only as a precautionary “just in case”– given empirical notions of resistance and stability back then – but also to keep interiors cool. Well, then, in constructions from the same period that used timber frameworks, the walls are invariably no thicker than the supporting pillar, exactly like contemporary walls, which match the thickness of the concrete equivalent.

Also worthy of study is the relation between window openings and wall. In the older houses, presumably from the late sixteenth century and throughout the seventeenth century, the solid wall prevailed, and soon we understand why: as life became easier and streets better policed, the number of windows kept increasing. By the eighteenth century, voids and solids balanced each other, and by the beginning of the nineteenth century, openings clearly dominated; from 1850 onward, window frames almost touched each other until the façade, after 1900, was for all practical purposes entirely open, having in many cases a common frame.

What we witness, therefore, is a tendency to open the wall more and more. With this climate of ours, it makes sense that this should have happened, however: despite much talk about the blinding brightness of our sky, about the excessive clarity of our days, etc., the fact remains that when well oriented, verandas are the best places in our houses to sit; after all, what is a veranda if not a completely open room? And yet when we modern architects suggest leaving one side of a room open: *aqui del rey!* All this proves, therefore, that master builders back in 1910 were on the right track. Faithful to the good Portuguese tradition of openness, they naturally applied to their plain constructions all the new possibilities of modern techniques, such as, in addition to façades that were almost completely open, the use of extremely thin iron columns; veranda floors reinforced with double Ts and shallow vaults; freestanding and elegantly proportioned stairs also made of iron, either straight or in S curves or at times in a spiral; and other characteristics still, aside from the independent quest for a different aesthetic balance.

The study should then be brought up to the present day, so as to determine both the reasons why such good norms were abandoned and the origins behind the “disarray” that we have witnessed for over twenty years. Once we exclude the major likely cause for change, i.e., the general socioeconomic transformations that came in the nineteenth century – precisely because our master builders, as we saw, embraced the new techniques without restraint – there remain causes that we could classify perhaps as “domestic” in nature. First, there was the unforeseen development of a deplorable architectural education responsible for burdening future architects with a muddled “techno-decorative” baggage that bore no relation to life, and for failing to clearly explain either the “why” of each element or the profound forces that in each period led to the emergence of common characteristics, that is to say, a *style*. Secondly, the development, also unforeseen, of the cinema exposed the greater public – which was until then unconcerned with “those things,” being used to the simple, but honest houses of the master builders – to new perspectives: bungalows, Americanized Spanish houses, castles, etc.

Once they joined forces – the property owner, leaving the cinema, dreaming of the house seen in such films, and the architect, leaving school, dreaming of the opportunity to show off what had been learned – the impact was immediate. In no time at all, the bungalow, the Americanized Spanish house, and the little castle were transferred
from the screen to the city streets – in grossly disfigured versions since they had to be built “on the cheap.”

That was when, with the best of intentions, the so-called “traditionalist movement” appeared, of which we were also a part. We did not grasp that the true tradition lay right there, two steps away, with our contemporaneous master builders; instead, through a contrived process of adaptation – completely removed from actual customs that were every day more present and that the master builders had been adapting with simplicity and good sense – we searched out lifeless elements from colonial times: if we are faking for the sake of faking, we should at least fake something of our own. And the farce would have continued – were it not for what eventually happened.

It is now up to us to recover all that lost time, reaching out to the master builder so often maligned, to the old portugá of 1910, because – and you may say what you want – it was he who preserved proper tradition, all by himself.

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1 In Brazil, this building technique is called pau-a-pique or taipa de mão.
2 Camisa e saia is a type of joint for wooden boards commonly used in Brazilian and Portuguese historic architecture. Like the shiplap joint, the camisa e saia uses rebated sides, but it differs from the shiplap in the symmetry of the board, which forms a T in section while the shiplap presents as an S. The boards are therefore alternated as they are assembled, with the wider surface alternatively facing up or down.
3 Aqui del rey! is a historical expression commonly used to express exaggerated dismay with a call for help that invoked the name of the king.
4 The term portugá is a popularly used in Brazil to refer to the Portuguese.