Lucio Costa (1902-1998) is known an early pioneer of both historic preservation and modern architecture. This essay is one of his most important contributions to preservation theory, for it advances the (then polemical) claim that vernacular architecture was as historically significant as refined works of high architecture. Interest in ‘folk’ traditions was widespread among 1930s intellectuals in many disciplines and on both sides of the political spectrum, from right wing architects like Giuseppe Pagano in Italy and Paul Sculze-Naumburg in Germany, to composers like Manuel de Falla in Spain, and communist poets like Mário de Andrade in Brazil, Costa’s personal friend and political sympathizer. Like other modernist architects, Costa looked upon vernacular buildings as early examples of rational unadorned construction, casting them as precedents to a history of modernism, which he saw as telescoping back as well as forward in time. What distinguished him from his contemporaries was precisely his view that documentation was not an end in itself, but rather a first step towards the preservation of vernacular buildings. Costa was born in Toulon, France, and was schooled in England and Switzerland before studying architecture at the Escola Nacional de Belas Artes in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, graduating in 1924. Exposure to the relatively simple colonial-era civil architecture of Diamantina, Brazil, led him to abandon his Beaux-Arts training for Modernism, which he promoted in the 1930s as the head of the Escola Nacional de Belas Artes. In 1937 he joined Brazil's Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico National (National Historic and Artistic Patrimony Service), where he eventually became director and worked until his retirement in 1972. He was unapologetic in his uneven investment in Portuguese colonial buildings and modernist buildings, and his disdain of anything built by Beaux-Arts architects in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He used his power within Brazil’s preservation bureaucracy to demolish Beaux-Arts buildings in historic colonial cities and to replace them with Modernist or neo-colonial buildings. Costa's proposal for the urban plan of Brasilia, the country's new capital, was adopted in 1957, together with his projective and proactive preservation plan for the city, which had yet to be built.

Keywords: Documentation, Vernacular, Context, Urbanism, Culture, Politics