

Living in a World Heritage Site: Preservation Policies and Local History in Ouro Preto, Brazil

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This article describes conflicts between state preservation policies and the needs the local population in the city of Ouro Preto, Brazil. Former capital of the wealthy gold mining state of Minas Gerais, Ouro Preto is today one of Brazil's most significant historic sites. Having been preserved nearly intact following the decline in gold mining during the nineteenth century, the city was rediscovered in the 1920s by modernist intellectuals seeking a representation of national identity, and in the years that followed a new federal preservation agency initiated efforts to homogenize its image. Beginning in the 1960s, however, modernization pressures led to antagonism between the preservation agency and the local population. A new industrial boom brought Ouro Preto renewed growth, a demand for more buildings in the historic area, and the rapid and disorderly occupation of its surrounding hills. More recently, as industrial activity has slumped, both the government and local population have identified tourism as the city's most important economic alternative. Historic and present-day conflicts are illustrated through examination of an important public space, the Largo do Coimbra.

The faculty of reminiscence is not something natural, but rather an achievement, a difficult invention through which men and women have learned gradually to appropriate their individual and collective pasts. Memory, a power so important in the construction of culture it took the form of a goddess among the ancient Greeks, is also a selective ability: in order to remember, one has to forget. Such a mechanism also seems to govern state heritage-preservation policies, which are often aimed at the construction of national identity.

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FIGURE 1. *Ouro Preto, the most significant colonial architectural ensemble in Brazil and the first city in Brazil to be classified as a national monument, and as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. (Photo courtesy of Laboratório de Fotodocumentação, Escola de Arquitetura, UFMG.)*

Such policies function as a dialectic: to create a national identity, certain aspects must be emphasized in preference to others, and light must be shed on certain moments in history while others are relegated to obscurity. As far as so-called historical cities are concerned, this process often entails erasing conspicuous marks of local history that have taken years to crystallize, in order to create a national symbol.

Such conflicting priorities are well represented in the vicissitudes of preservation policies adopted this century in the city of Ouro Preto, Brazil. The former capital of the state of Minas Gerais and the country's most important urban center from the gold cycle of the eighteenth century,¹ Ouro Preto today is the most significant colonial architectural ensemble in Brazil. It was also the first city in the country to be classified as a national monument, and as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO (FIG.1). Preserved practically intact thanks to a long period of economic stagnation, the city has been the focus since the 1930s of preservation policies that have largely succeeded in preserving its physical fabric. But such policies have created an idealized object, at the same time they have overlooked key aspects of the city's history and alienated its population. To illustrate such vicissitudes, this article will examine, albeit briefly, the transformations of one of Ouro Preto's most significant urban spaces, the Largo do Coimbra, a space typical of Portuguese urbanism in the Americas.

THE CAPITAL OF THE MINES OF GOLD

In the 1960s, in an important study of civil architecture in colonial Brazil, Robert Smith observed that even though the Portuguese discoverers were men of the Renaissance, as urbanists, they "belonged to the Middle Ages."² The presence of Portuguese medieval urbanism in the colonial cities of Brazil made them completely different from their Spanish counterparts in the Americas. The regular layout of the latter, derived from architectural treatises written by Renaissance theoreticians, was established in the "Leyes Generales de los Reynos de Indias," issued by King Phillip II of Spain in 1573. It was largely by means of these "laws" that the expanding Spanish Empire attempted to establish urban centers that followed regular geometrical patterns, even when the lay of the land was not suitable to such abstraction. Thus, the Spanish colonial town, with its checkerboard grid, differentiated itself from surrounding farming areas, creating a clear separation between culture and nature. Spanish colonial towns were also distinguished by the conspicuous role played by a *plaza mayor* or *plaza de armas*. This geometrical space, where both religious and temporal power were concentrated, played the role of town center, exercising an unquestionable power of attraction. In contrast, the Brazilian town, loyal to its Portuguese origins, was irregularly shaped and multicentered, having an undefined outline.³ Such characteristics were evident during the early coloniza-

tion of the coast in places like Salvador and Rio de Janeiro. But they were even more pronounced in Ouro Preto, which was founded in the early eighteenth century to assist with the exploitation of gold in Brazil's highlands — a region that would become known, not without reason, as Minas Gerais (General Mines).

Today Ouro Preto occupies a rather peculiar and unfavorable site. At 1,100 meters above sea level, it stretches over a craggy area, occupying steep sites that are difficult to access — a constraint compounded by the hard local soil, which makes grading difficult. Ouro Preto's linear shape may be explained by the very process of its formation. The city emerged as the connection between two small miners' settlements, erected around two chapels (Antônio Dias and Pilar) situated on opposite sides of a hill. Reflecting the Portuguese colonial tradition, the city was not planned or organized according to a preconceived layout, but formed gradually, articulating itself around an old road connecting these two original centers of activity. Such a layout adapted itself to the contours of the terrain in a casual manner; instead of taking a grid form with aligned streets, the city spread out to cover the hillsides, with individual structures positioned to avoid both the strong winds and floods that were frequent in the area (FIG. 2). If no established pattern can be observed in such a process of settlement formation, it still followed a certain logic. Livia Romanelli d'Assumpção has written that the layout of Brazilian towns in the eighteenth century: "follow[ed], where possible, the same contour line, avoiding obstacles, bordering water streams or even hilltops for improved orientation and economy."⁴

Another key aspect of Ouro Preto's formation was its fast initial growth. The city evolved from 1701 to 1721 from a small miners' settlement to the capital of the newly created province of Minas Gerais. The rapidity of its growth reflected the wealth to be found there. Despite the poor alluvium mining technique in use at the time, in the first seventy years of the eighteenth century Brazil produced approximately half of all gold mined worldwide from 1500 to 1800. Such economic vitality attracted legions of mostly Portuguese immigrants in search of wealth. As a result, Ouro Preto's early ensemble of buildings underwent rapid expansion, and the conditions were created for the establishment of a number of intermediary social class-



FIGURE 2. *Ouro Preto's layout.* (Based on: R.M. de Andrade, "The Conservation of Urban Sites," in *The Conservation of Cultural Property*, Paris, UNESCO Press, 1975.)



FIGURE 3. *The face of Brazil's colonial towns: a sequence of irregularly spread streets, lined by rows of houses built to the limits of their lots, forming an unbroken street wall.* (Photo courtesy of Laboratório de Fotodocumentação, Escola de Arquitetura, UFMG.)

es. On the one hand, as the Portuguese Crown realized it needed to make itself present in the region, it dispatched a large bureaucratic apparatus to the city to oversee the area's mining activities. On the other hand, the explosion of wealth in the area led to a rapid expansion of the city's business and service sectors, attracting craftsmen, artisans, masons, sculptors, carpenters, tailors — as well as tramps and prostitutes.

In such a rich and multifaceted environment, it is not difficult to imagine the role played by public space. In general, the streets and squares of Brazil's colonial cities served as the locale for a great amount of economic and social activity. Following this pattern, Ouro Preto's streets were soon transformed from simple miners' trails to lively social spaces. Their appearance also changed, as houses along them were built to be admired, their facades given ever more prominence. It was not long before the image of such colonial towns was consolidated as a sequence of irregular streets, lined by rows of houses built to the limits of their lots, forming an unbroken street wall (FIG. 3). And in the absence of large civic squares similar to the *plazas mayores* of the Spanish colonial towns, small squares, usually associated with churches, became the focus of urban life. The basic rule in creating such centers for socializing seems to have been to assign one church to each small square.

The rich urban scene of Ouro Preto during the eighteenth century was no exception to this pattern of colonial urban growth. Churches articulated space, demarcating the central areas of Ouro Preto and occupying most significant locations. In her study of the city's churches and their spatial patterns, Raquel Julião asserted that these religious buildings served as expressions of identity and independence for a multiplicity of social groups. "In fact, not only did they help to organize the local society, but they also structured the urban landscape. It is the ensemble

ble of churches that gives a meaning to the town, making it understandable.”⁵ The only exception to this rule was Tiradentes Square, an official space laid out on top of Santa Quitéria Hill. At the highest point in the city, separating its two initial settlements, its occupation was always planned and governed by the state (FIG. 4). A different spatial arrangement eventually appeared in this area, tending toward a regular checkerboard pattern, reflecting imperial power and its increasingly repressive policies.

MODERNITY AND TRADITION: AN ORTHODOX NARRATIVE

In a country marked by the ideology of the new, whose landscape is extremely changeable, the preservation of an entire ensemble of buildings from the eighteenth century, seems remarkable. Notwithstanding, as has been noted by Rodrigo M.F. de Andrade, Ouro Preto’s present aspect, “characterized by the tiered layout on a steep hillside, bears the marks of its history — early wealth, a period of rapid development, a century and a half of administrative power and prestige, followed by a gradual decline, impoverishment and loss of status.”⁶

De Andrade’s comment reflects the fact that even though the city lost its economic vitality after the depletion of its gold mines in the early nineteenth century, it remained the capital of Minas Gerais for nearly one hundred years more, organizing the state’s economic, social and political life through its administrative offices, supported by business and manufacturing activities. In addition, when the School of Mines was founded in 1875, Ouro Preto became an important academic center, contributing to the formation of a technical elite that rose to prominence in Brazil’s business and political spheres. However, this

new balance was suddenly disrupted with the advent of the Republic, when the decision was made to move the state capital to Belo Horizonte in 1897.⁷ Following the departure of state government, Ouro Preto underwent a rapid decline, and its population dropped from 17,860 to less than 10,000 inhabitants.

Preserved nearly intact thanks chiefly to the decline in gold mining in the nineteenth century, but also to the loss of its status as a state capital, Ouro Preto was not rediscovered until the 1920s, when writers participating in the Brazilian modernist movement came to regard it as a symbol of national identity. During this period, heritage preservation also became politically significant in Brazil for the first time, attracting government involvement.⁸ At the time of the first centennial of Brazilian independence, when large federal museums had already come into existence, the press was filled with accusations that the country’s historic cities were being neglected, causing the irremediable destruction of the “nation’s treasures.”

There is a peculiar twist to this story of the rediscovery of Brazilian built heritage. Heritage-preservation policies in Brazil have traditionally been drawn up and implemented by progressive intellectuals rather than conservative groups. One reason is that in addition to its strong criticism of traditional academic arts, the Brazilian modern movement has stressed cultural renovation and a search for roots, and has placed the issue of identity on the national agenda. As Helena Bomeny has pointed out, modernist intellectuals in Brazil believed that “cosmopolitanism, immigration, foreignism, imitation, classicism’s conventional and universalized formulas, timeless solutions, stilted language” were dangerous.⁹ Thus, while keeping in close contact with the European avant-garde, Brazilian modernists developed a peculiar relationship with tradition, refusing the idea of a radical rupture with the past. As summarized by the art critic Aracy Amaral:



FIGURE 4. *Tiradentes Square.*
(Photo courtesy of Laboratório de Fotodocumentação, Escola de Arquitetura, UFMG.)

In the twenties, architecture, literature, and the visual arts were marked by a desire for formal renovation, making the early years of this century a time of cultural definition, particularly in São Paulo. The intellectual and art communities remained attentive to what was happening in Europe, especially in Paris, but emotional commitments lay with Brazil. Although educated in Europe, the Brazilian artists and writers who participated in the modernist movement – which had its historical beginning during the Week of Modern Art at São Paulo’s Municipal Theater, 11 to 18 February 1922 – gradually came to realize that Brazilian reality was as important as formal renovation.¹⁰

In this context, it should come as no surprise that Brazilian modernists “rediscovered” Minas Gerais and, in particular, Ouro Preto. In their search for a “deep” national identity, they identified expressions of genuine Brazilian civilization in this eighteenth-century ensemble, and in so doing, they revalued the local Baroque style, which had long been considered eccentric and unimportant. Instead, the modernists claimed the style was a new cultural synthesis, created by an isolated society which had managed to rework various cultural influences in its own manner. In this sense, the approach of Brazilian modernists to the eighteenth century can be compared with the approach of the European avant-garde to the primitive and archaic — with the particularity that the primitive in Brazil pointed to the country’s cultural roots. In Brazil the avant-garde rediscovery of primitive culture corresponded to the rediscovery of another, nonofficial national culture, one which had been ignored for years.

In terms of architecture, this reading of the national past eventually came to play an important part both in the formulation of Brazil’s preservation policy and Brazil’s distinct strain of modernist design. The combination of a search for the new and a reevaluation of tradition is clearly evident in the course followed by Lúcio Costa, the creator of Brasília, who was also the intellectual leader of the Brazilian architectural renovation movement of the 1930s. Costa’s enduring goal was to integrate modernity and tradition, based on a reflection of the particularity of his professional field, architecture, and its relationship with Brazilian reality.¹¹ In this regard, it should also be pointed out that Brazilian modernist architects had a pragmatic interest in recovering the nation’s colonial past, since they believed its traditional forms contained important lessons. Most importantly, they identified a correspondence between colonial and modern architecture, which, in their opinion, shared such common characteristics as simplicity, austerity, purity, and proper use of materials.

The cultural critic Antoine Compagnon has referred to the discourses developed by the modernist avant-garde and within formalist criticism as “orthodox narratives.” According to this view, the course of art within modernity has been characterized by a reductive search for essence. Analyzing the critical works of Hugo Friedrich in literature, and Clement Greenberg in the fine arts, Compagnon has shown how the development of modern art embodies a “purification dialectics.” This was undoubt-

edly the position of Brazilian modernist architects, who viewed architecture as moving progressively toward increased authenticity and autonomy as reflected in such values as structural truth and simplicity. As such, their reading of tradition represented just such an “orthodox narrative.” It should then come as no surprise that they rejected the historicist nineteenth century (whose architecture, as well as being “imported,” they believed to have been characterized by ornamentation and superficiality), in favor of the austere colonial architecture of the eighteenth century. In their pursuit of depuration, the modernists needed to choose prominent ancestors, and the severe builders of the gold-cycle towns of Minas Gerais corroborated theses defended by Costa, Niemeyer, and others. Thus, as Compagnon has pointed out, the “orthodox narratives” of modernism tended to be both teleological (insofar as they reflected the very outcome they intended to arrive at), and apologetic (insofar as they legitimated contemporary production).¹²

MANUFACTURING HERITAGE: THE MAKING OF A NATIONAL SYMBOL

This particularly Brazilian modernist approach to the past raised the important question of the preservation of the nation’s colonial heritage, which was seen as essential to the construction of national identity. With the “1930 Revolution,” the issue also became a main focus of the new ruling group, which tried to establish a government-oriented cultural policy.¹³ Toward this end, the new rulers engaged a number of progressive intellectuals from the modernist movement to work in the Ministry of Education and Health. In July 1933 these appointees’ first historic-preservation step was to make Ouro Preto a “national monument” by Decree No.22.928. In fact, this action was largely symbolic, since no specific legal provision was taken to protect the site or its individual monuments. But in 1936 the Minister of Education, Gustavo Capanema, with the help of Mário de Andrade, one of the most prominent modern Brazilian writers, prepared a conservation law to be submitted to the Federal Parliament. An even more important step was taken with the creation of a new federal agency to oversee heritage preservation: called SPHAN — Serviço do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional (National Historic and Artistic Heritage Service) — it was incorporated into the organizational structure of the Ministry of Education.¹⁴ Finally, in 1937 another decree, No.25, provided SPHAN with the legal means for an effective preservation policy, the instrument of *tombamento* (listing). Applied almost immediately to Ouro Preto, this legal procedure enabled SPHAN to prevent damage to or demolition of a listed building, and it enabled it to control the introduction of new buildings to a listed site.

It is interesting to note that both the mechanism of official government protection and the first measures taken by SPHAN derived directly from the “orthodox narrative” of modernism described above. In Brazil this had led to the establishment of

an affinity between the Baroque architecture of the colonial past and the modern architecture of the present. According to this view, an authentic Brazilian architecture had only developed during the mining cycle of the eighteenth century, and all previous buildings had merely been transplants of Portuguese architecture — a sort of “pre-history” of Brazilian architecture. One corollary of this ideological posture was the myth that only Brazil’s Baroque architecture — as well as its contemporary modernist architecture — had dignity, and that the interval of 150 years between had been sterile. In this way an “oblivion strategy” was set in motion which stipulated that in order to recall an idealized (austere and authentic) eighteenth century, it was necessary to “forget” the slow evolution that cities such as Ouro Preto had undergone since. Therefore, in the very listing of Ouro Preto as a preservation site, the artistic value of its colonial ensemble triumphed over its historical value. But privileging aesthetic expression in this way eclipsed the town’s actual history and many of the components that made it a socially constructed whole. Government preservation policies in the years since Ouro Preto was first listed have only further emphasized this focus on the colonial ensemble as an idealized object. Lia Motta has caustically summarized the preservation practice imposed on Ouro Preto as follows: “Economically emptied, the city was used as a raw material for a nationality laboratory of modernist inspiration, leaving its population, which was not even mentioned, subordinate to that idealized view.”¹⁵

In his book *The Past is a Foreign Country*, David Lowenthal asserts that every act of recognition “alters survival from the past.”¹⁶ This seems to be exactly the case with Ouro Preto. In its search for a national symbol, SPHAN initiated an effort to homogenize the image of the city, thereby eliminating the majority of its recent urban and architectural transformations and, concomitantly, important references to local history. In essence, systematic action was taken to efface traces of the nineteenth century—requiring, for example, the removal of such Neoclassical or eclectic architectural elements as gables and platbands as a condition for remodeling approval. Such elements were viewed as disruptive to the colonial ensemble’s unified appearance. Examples of such “corrective” actions may be found throughout the city, but one particularly noteworthy example is the Banco Comércio e Indústria, where a colonial facade was added, and nineteenth-century architectural elements removed (FIGS. 5-7).

Similar homogenizing stylistic criteria were also mandated for new buildings. Initially, these envisioned that some modern buildings would be accepted, provided they were “of good architectural quality,” as evaluated by SPHAN’s experts. In setting such a standard, SPHAN was following the directive of Lúcio Costa, who (in line with his modernist convictions) argued that sooner or later SPHAN would have to ban “colonial disguises.” Costa also asserted there was nothing worse than the tendency, which he identified as predominant in the United States and Great Britain, to reproduce everything to an “appropriate style,” including light switches. Thus, during the

initial years of the preservation effort approval was given, for example, to the well-known Grande Hotel, designed by Oscar Niemeyer. Eventually, this building caused heated arguments among both intellectuals and the local population about the evaluative criteria used by the agency. And, given the difficulty of analyzing such designs, in later years SPHAN began to employ more prescriptive rules that specified a number of stylistic features such as typical details of construction and finishing for roofs, cornices and sashes, and strict color schemes.

The imposition of such design guidelines for new buildings soon caused a “heritage style” to appear in Ouro Preto, typified by contemporary buildings which emulated houses from the eighteenth century. Because the city was not expected to grow rapidly, SPHAN’s initial regulatory attention focused on building facades, while disregarding such other design parameters as lot size, house position, and building volume, which would soon prove to be very important.¹⁷ But when the city did begin to grow rapidly, especially in the 1960s, this approach led to a harmful “counterfeiting” of the ensemble, and the emergence of a hybrid architecture in which “heritage-style” buildings mingled with original specimens. Here, as Lowenthal asserts, “the passage of time dissolves distinction between originals and emulations, and augments their confluence” — which ends up, even from the viewpoint of aesthetic recognition, posing a problem.¹⁸



FIGURE 5. Banco do Comércio e Indústria, still with its eclectic elements. (Photo courtesy of Prof. Ivo P. Menezes.)



FIGURE 6. (LEFT) Banco do Comércio e Indústria, after “corrective” action by SPHAN. (Photo courtesy of Prof. Ivo P. Menezes)



FIGURE 7. (RIGHT) Liceu de Artes e Ofícios, an important nineteenth-century building, in its original state before the intervention. (Photo courtesy of Prof. Ivo P. Menezes)

THE EFFACEMENT OF LOCAL HISTORY

A good example of the effort to homogenize Ouro Preto's image can be seen in preservation-motivated design interventions to the Largo do Coimbra, an open space typical of Portuguese urbanism in the Americas. As previously discussed, early settlements in Brazil developed in an organic manner, creating a number of irregularly shaped public spaces, often articulated by religious buildings that played an important part in urban sociability. This was the case with the Largo do Coimbra, a widening of the street fronting the important Church of São Francisco de Assis. In the historic city, this plaza served as a counterpoint to the adjacent Tiradentes Square, which was the site of the Governor's Palace, the City Council, and the Prison. Whereas Tiradentes Square had been inserted at the highest point of Santa Quitéria Hill as the official space of the city, the Largo do Coimbra supported such daily activities as shopping and socializing.

The predominantly commercial character of the Largo do Coimbra was strengthened in the nineteenth century by the construction of a rustic drover's market (FIG.8). Lying in front of this building was a poorly paved patio, into which piles had been driven to restrain the animals. In the center of the patio there was also a large rectangular stone washtub, used by drovers for washing their utensils, and a stone column that provided running water to residents of the area. In time, major grocery stores, as well as fabric and haberdasher's shops, came to locate in the vicinity of the Antônio Dias Market, as it became known. As a result, it became the most popular market in Ouro Preto — a local business and social center. As described by a local newspaper in the nineteenth century:

[The market] attracted major stores from Rua do Ouvidor, the most important in town, and from other places; and while shopping and dealing, people would talk about other

subjects, financial and political conditions, and also gossip a little bit. It was the town's gazette. Everything was seen, learned and told there.¹⁹

Like other towns, Ouro Preto has been characterized by a process of change that has had its own internal logic, and which has been faster at times of economic boom and slower at times of stagnation. Thus, toward the end of the nineteenth century the drover's market was replaced with a Neoclassical building, the predominant style of the time (FIG.9). It was this internal logic of transformation that was interrupted after the town was listed by SPHAN in 1938. From then on, every urban transformation was supervised by the state, which also began to act directly to enhance the image of the colonial ensemble. According to this policy, the market building in the Largo do Coimbra was demolished in 1946-1947 to provide a better view of the church. The demolition was not considered significant at the time, since the market's architectural style was regarded as unimportant and discordant with the city's colonial image (FIG.10). However, some years later the head of SPHAN, reflecting on this type of action, made a more considered judgement:

The demolition of minor buildings might, in some cases, appear to be justified with the object of enhancing the significance of a major monument; but, in considering such possibilities, those responsible for the conservation of the site might very properly demur and refuse to authorize such a step if such action seemed likely to cause a lack of overall balance or if it tended to falsify or to obscure the historical significance of the area.²⁰

In her book *The Power of Place*, Dolores Hayden discussed the relationship between built environment, public history, and social memory. She drew attention to what the philosopher



FIGURE 8. *Largo do Coimbra with the original market.* (Photo courtesy of Laboratório de Fotodocumentação, Escola de Arquitetura, UFMG.)

Edward S. Casey has called “place memory”: “the stabilizing persistence of place as a container of experiences that contributes so powerfully to its intrinsic memorability.”²¹ Demolition of the nineteenth-century market to enhance the visibility of a listed monument clearly disregarded the “place memory” of the Largo do Coimbra. By this action was its long history as a place of business and socialization summarily effaced on the basis of purely aesthetic considerations. In essence, the local history — the intricate web of social, economic and cultural relationships that made up the face of the place and the life of the town — was discarded to provide room for an idealized national symbol.

According to such a preservation policy, which systematically excludes participation by local residents, it might come as no surprise if the place memorability of the entire city were eventually to disappear — at least as far as the local population is concerned. One might even note how a curious inversion has taken place: in Ouro Preto the state has assumed the role of “local guardian,” while local residents have come to be viewed as hostile to the preservation agenda, transgressors within their own city.

CONSUMING TRADITION: PRESERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Considering the above relationships, it is not surprising that state preservation policies have found diminishing support among the local population, which tends to consider SPHAN an exogenous agency whose purpose is to preserve the city for outsiders. Even the opening of a local SPHAN office in Ouro Preto has not helped to change such perceptions; on the contrary, SPHAN employees are viewed as intrusive and hostile to local interests. It is noteworthy that such antagonism has never grown into open and active opposition, as could be expected. On the one hand, this may be explained by the generally weak tradition of engagement and the low degree of organization

among the Brazilian population. On the other, it might be the case that the ideological force of preservationist discourse has caused the discourse of modernization in the city to abstain from formulating itself in a more aggressive manner. Thus, instead of openly opposing federal influence in local affairs, the population has resorted to the “camouflage strategy” of building clandestinely, or — in the words of a former SPHAN official — engaging in construction “over the weekends.”

As late as the 1960s no grave conflict had resulted from the divergence of views between SPHAN and the local population. Economically emptied, the city remained largely unchanged from colonial times (FIG. 11). This situation changed rapidly, however, starting in the later years of the 1960s, as the development of the aluminum mining industry in the region brought new momentum to Ouro Preto’s economy. To house the increasing population, the aluminum producer ALCAN erected a new district on the outskirts of town. However, as housing demand could not be entirely met by this new district, the built-up portions of the city, which had remained practically unchanged since the late eighteenth century, expanded to include previously open peripheral areas, where mostly low-standard buildings were constructed.²² A single figure gives an idea of the magnitude of this expansion process: when the whole ensemble was listed in 1938, it comprised approximately 1,000 buildings; by contrast, an additional 3,000 structures had been approved by 1985. In addition to expansion beyond its previous limits, such growth involved building on previously open areas within the city, even in backyards, changing radically the colonial ensemble’s ratio of open to built-up area. Such modernization pressures soon resulted in fierce antagonism between the local population, which had been systematically excluded from the formulation of preservation policies, and SPHAN, which continued to try to maintain the colonial ensemble’s appearance through building-design controls.

During this period the town also started to become a popular destination for tourists, who were attracted by its historical



FIGURE 9. *The Neoclassical market (nineteenth century).* (Photo courtesy of Laboratório de Fotodocumentação, Escola de Arquitetura, UFMG.)



FIGURE 10. *Largo do Coimbra after the demolition of the market. (Photo courtesy of Laboratório de Fotodocumentação, Escola de Arquitetura, UFMG.)*

value and the unique atmosphere of its Baroque architecture. Tourism brought many impacts on daily life, redefining the use and occupation of some historic areas, and causing some old residences to be transformed into hotels or business establishments. In this regard, the town's identity as a cultural-tourism site was strengthened in the late 1960s by the establishment of the Winter Festival, organized by the Federal University, and aimed at promoting courses and workshops in connection with different artistic activities. Today this event attracts a large number of students, intellectuals and artists from Brazil and abroad, giving visibility and prestige to the city. However, the local population is generally excluded from these activities, and the festival has only reinforced the sense that their city has been appropriated in a manner alien to their interests. Such exclusionary tendencies had first appeared in the 1950s, when the practice began of moving the state government to the former capital on the September 7 (Brazil's Independence Day). On these occasions Tiradentes Square would be fenced off and reserved for the authorities and their guests.

It is ironic to note how the appropriation of the city by outsiders has taken contradictory forms today. Quite apart from the official occupation of Tiradentes Square on Independence Day, another type of appropriation takes place during the Winter Festival and other seasonal feasts (such as Carnival and the Feast of 12). At these times the town's public spaces are occupied by a mostly young population, in a manner that is openly transgressive. For example, Tiradentes Square becomes a "free republic" during the festivals, its main monument continuously occupied by youngsters. The reaction of various elements of the local population differs with respect to these divergent forms of tourist occupation. On the one hand, the local elite, which profits from the official tourist flow, strongly resents the transgressive use of its traditional places. On the other, more working-class residents, who gen-

erally live in outlying areas and identify the city with its historical areas, see the feast celebrations as opportunities to come to the city center and take part in public events. The participation of such people in Carnival parades is particularly widespread.

From the above, it is clear that both industrialization and tourism have deeply changed the cultural status of Ouro Preto in recent decades. However, by viewing the town purely as a work of art, the preservation agencies have instituted policies that cannot reconcile such new pressures. The situation has been compounded by the failure of the various government agencies to cooperate on a regional planning effort. Efforts at comprehensive planning for Ouro Preto were first instituted in the late 1960s when it became obvious that uncontrolled expansion was causing a disfiguration of the city's colonial ensemble. In 1968 the Portuguese architect Viana de Lima, a UNESCO consultant, prepared the first such development plan, which consisted primarily of a zoning map and the definition of preservation and expansion areas. A few years later, a multidisciplinary team, under the direction of the Fundação João Pinheiro, a state-government planning agency, drew up a more comprehensive plan. This 1974-1975 effort included plans for new urban infrastructure and landscaping; the restoration of monuments; and social, economic, institutional and administrative initiatives. In addition, an urban expansion scheme was prepared, proposing the creation of new centers to ensure that development could continue in a consistent manner without affecting the integrity of the colonial ensemble.

It is indicative of the problems of Ouro Preto that almost 25 years after such plans were first proposed, institutional difficulties continue to block their implementation. Much of the delay may be attributed to a lack of cooperation between the various agencies responsible for the preservation and administration of Brazilian cities. For example, although federal, state



FIGURE 11. *As late as the 1960s the city remained practically unchanged, having undergone no major transformation. View from the Largo do Rosário around 1960. (Photo courtesy of Laboratório de Fotodocumentação, Escola de Arquitetura, UFMG.)*

and local authorities are involved in Ouro Preto, they do not always act in a collaborative manner. With respect to heritage preservation, Brazilian legislation provides for “concurrent competence” of the federal union, states, and municipalities, but it fails to define how each level of government is to act. Thus, in Ouro Preto, SPHAN (a federal agency) is in charge of listing procedures, and has been responsible for the maintenance and conservation of the city since 1938 — including the inspection and coordination of designs and the maintenance of museums. The state government, represented by Fundação João Pinheiro, has been charged with overall planning for the city and its outlying region. And the city council maintains its role as the principal local administrative power, responsible for, among other things, the enforcement of zoning laws.

Conflicts have become quite common in this atmosphere of competing spheres of power and interest. For example, as a representative of local interests, city government has often opposed SPHAN policies, which it regards as unnecessarily restrictive. In the opinion of an architect from SPHAN, “the local authority used to omit their responsibility for the conservation of local heritage and even make the work of SPHAN more difficult.”²³ Local government has also failed to support the urban planning efforts of state government, with the result that these efforts have generally failed to have any impact on urban conditions. As for SPHAN, despite the incorporation of new concepts into its discourse (especially the “Declaration of Venice,” advocating such new ideas as the socially oriented use of monuments), it has continued to consider the city primarily as an aesthetic object to be preserved, and continued to ignore matters of economic growth and social development.

A number of conflicts since the 1960s have pitted SPHAN openly against local administrative agencies. In certain instances local government has directly challenged SPHAN’s control by implementing changes it deemed necessary without the federal agency’s approval. Such was the case when the sides of the Morro do Cruzeiro (Cruzeiro Hill) were occupied in the mid-1970s. Even though SPHAN claimed such action would compromise the scenic value of an area that was highly visible from within the ensemble, the local administration approved lower-class zoning for the area, which eventually resulted in the new district of Amazonas. Such a case reveals a class dynamic, according to which the local administration claims that it is answering the demand for working-class dwellings, which the preservation agency has tried to exclude from the historical center. Thus, two different discourses are opposed: a preservationist discourse, based on broadly defined aesthetic and historical considerations; and a development discourse, based on local political and social conditions. Such a dynamic was also at work in another well-known incident, which took place in the mid-1980s and involved construction of a local bus terminal. SPHAN refused to approve the design for this building, claiming it incorporated modern elements, such as tempered glass, that it considered too aggressive. Here, too, the local administration prevailed, and the terminal was constructed despite the federal agency’s opinion.

The single period of respite from this long-running conflict occurred from 1993 to 1996, when a candidate associated with the preservationist cause was elected mayor. During this period, the GAT (Technical Advisory Group) was created to bring together the activities of various official departments and provide advice to both the population and the city administration. In its brief existence, GAT undertook an exemplary effort to achieve rapprochement with the local population, starting a dialogue that permitted consideration of its viewpoint in design review. Another important achievement by GAT was the formulation and approval of a master plan for the city, which aimed at organizing its growth and reconciling preservation and development demands. However, GAT’s early successes failed to reverse the negative popular image of the preservation cause. And today local people continue to perceive preservationist policies as being alien — and even contrary — to their interests. Such antagonism is most strongly voiced by the lower classes, who consider current policies to be elitist, focused on the preservation of the historical center for tourists to the detriment to other social needs. Such an unfavorable evaluation was reflected in the outcome of the local election in 1996, when a candidate for mayor was elected whose message focused on the needs of local residents, as opposed to local heritage. Support for this candidate was strongest among residents of suburban and rural areas.

Many of the conflicts referred to above have been played out in the Largo do Coimbra. Most obviously, the city’s growth since the 1960s has radically altered the view from this space. The historical view encompassed a number of unoccupied hills, but this was completely changed with the rapid and disorderly occupation of the surrounding hills. Another important change involves uses it accommodates. Despite the demolition of its market, business activity soon reappeared in the plaza, initially as a weekly fair, but later in the form of selling handicrafts to tourists (FIG. 12). The difference in the nature of past and present commercial activity indicates the effects of preservationist interventions. As a result of its disfigurement, local residents now identify the plaza as a place reserved for outsiders. Thus, even if the plaza’s business orientation has been preserved, commercial activity there is targeted at tourists, who come to buy handicrafts in soapstone, a “typical” product of the region. It is interesting this shift in focus has not affected the church, however, which the local population still identifies as their own (FIG. 13). For example, the proposal by a mayor a few years ago to hold a concert for a select group of patrons in the church was met with outrage from the local population.

Several years ago the sociologist Mônica Fischer studied how such preservation policies are perceived by the population of another historical Brazilian city. Her comprehensive research in the city of Mariana, located near Ouro Preto (and also listed by SPHAN), in 1992-1993 sheds light on the case of Ouro Preto as well. Through a series of interviews with local residents, Fischer sought to capture, in a representative manner, the views they had of their city, especially with respect to preservation and modernization of the urban tissue. Her research showed that most resi-

dents liked to live in Mariana, an opinion shared by members of different social classes, who all claimed it was a safe, comfortable, and peaceful place.²⁴ By contrast, none of the respondents to her survey said that historical value was the reason they liked to live in Mariana. One conclusion that might be drawn from these findings is that the city is valued as a set of social relationships, not because its rich historical heritage has given it nationwide prestige and prominence. Fischer also found that respondents generally assigned positive meanings to features of the traditional town related to the household and private spheres — home, furniture, and the like. From this she concluded the population clearly wished to retain the town's stability in environmental and emotional terms, since these qualities provided a guarantee of privacy, comfort, safety and peace. Respondents were also unanimous in their desire to preserve the town's churches, but Fischer found this to be the sole instance in which they would voice concern with preservation. In particular, the town's Baroque churches, with their historical/artistic assets, were identified as unique symbols of the town's identity, deserving true preservationist effort.

As far as public space was concerned, the research pointed to a paradox which typifies a common "ideology of modernity" in Brazil. The old urban tissue was valued when it was perceived as being supportive of a familial and peaceful life, yet it was also considered an obstacle to progress. The general perception of Mariana's layout among residents was negative: to them, it was an "entangled" urban space, having "only old houses" that were "old-fashioned" and "run-down." By contrast, the modern, which means the new, was identified with the life of larger cities and the possibilities of leisure, action and consumption. In respect to these associations, Fischer noted that older residents tended to chose traditional images and values, while younger ones preferred modern patterns for cities, streets and buildings. She noted one reason may have been that the younger group lacked access to experiences promised by the modern world through various types of mass leisure, such as music concerts, sports events, and shopping at malls.²⁵

In this relation may lie the most serious issue identified by Fischer's research as far as the formulation of preservation policies: the local population's failure to associate a historical city with development. The population surveyed made no positive reference to Mariana as an urban space capable of being recovered and renewed. Instead, preservation agencies were perceived as hostile to, rather than supportive of, local development. Such a view explains the widespread feeling among residents that they must evade control by such agencies, whose criteria they cannot understand. (A single figure suffices to indicate the extent of this problem in Ouro Preto: during the period of activity of GAT, approximately 50 percent of building designs were submitted for analysis only after those responsible had been summoned to do so.) Thus, in dealing with the city as a aesthetic and idealized object, it can be seen how traditional preservationist policies, deprived of coordination with public policies of a broader scope, end up proving incompatible with the dynamics of the real city. As such, they only strengthen a false dichotomy between preservation and development.

CONCLUSIONS: AT THE CROSSROADS OF DEVELOPMENT

Cities such as Ouro Preto are at a crossroads with regard to their social and economic future and the prospect of sustainable development. Following decades of fast growth, the 1990s have now brought industrial deceleration and the disappearance of thousands of jobs. As the result of economic stagnation, tourism is today seen, both by the government and the local population, as an important economic alternative, one which could prove beneficial to the preservation of the historical ensemble. However, the preservation policies so far implemented do not seem to favor the emergence of such a new model for development. In addition, as far as tourism is concerned, a considerable problem exists with regard to the poor quality of local



FIGURE 12. *Largo do Coimbra in 1998.*
(Photo by author.)



FIGURE 13. The church of São Francisco de Assis remains identified by the local population as something of their own: local celebration in 1930. (Photo courtesy of Laboratório de Fotodocumentação, Escola de Arquitetura, UFMG.)

services and the limited capacity of quality hotels. It would seem this might only be resolved by adopting a program of modernization involving the attraction of outside investment. However, such a program would most likely face considerable resistance from local property owners who, in their hostility to public authorities, would most likely refuse to cooperate.

The prospect of further tourism promotion would also seem to strengthen the opposition between a “false tradition,” for external consumption, and a “secret local tradition,” which remains marginal and refractory to preservation policies. As has been pointed out, the preservationists’ attempts to homogenize the urban ensemble and fit it to an idealized image, caused a systematic erasure of local history and memorability. Among other things, this has led to a lack of identification between the population and the Baroque scenery, which is perceived as belonging to outsiders. To preserve its culture and tradition, local society has been forced to develop a strategy of “self-absorption,” by which local residents have become increasingly isolated. The result is the survival of practices, usually associated with the strong religious and popular traditions, but which are barely noticeable to tourists — such as a language of church bells and the lit balconies marking the path of processions. The outsider, on the other hand, is offered images of a stylized history that have a stronger commercial appeal: replicas of historical sculp-

tures, newly made antiques, and even the possibility of strolling round the old town wearing traditional costumes, having his or her image immortalized in artificially aged photographs (FIG.14).



FIGURE 14. Outsiders are offered images of a stylized history that has a stronger commercial appeal: replicas of historical sculptures, newly made antiques, and even the possibility of strolling around the old town wearing traditional costumes, having their images immortalized in artificially aged photographs. (Photo by author.)

REFERENCE NOTES

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11. On this subject, see Fonseca, *O Patrimônio*, p.98.
12. A. Compagnon, *Os Cinco Paradoxos da Modernidade* (Belo Horizonte: Editora da UFMG, 1996), p.44.
13. The so-called "1930 Revolution" was basically a military revolt that culminated in a coup d'état replacing Washington Luiz with Getúlio Vargas as president. This movement, which inaugurated a new regime, "was made up mostly of young men, both military and civilian, and it produced upheaval and fresh starts in social and economic life as well as in politics." H.E. Mindlin, *Modern Architecture in Brazil* (Rio de Janeiro/Amsterdam: Colibris Editora Ltd., 1956), p.4.
14. It is interesting to note that, although connected to a federal ministry, SPHAN has been marked, since it was established, by a relative autonomy in conducting its affairs. Supported by the work of a capable body of technical employees and a work approach that has remained relatively homogeneous throughout its entire life, it has been characterized by a continuity that is seldom found in public administration in Brazil.
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