

Narratives of Imagination

Adélia Borges

Text published in the book “Heartland Brazil”, Bei, São Paulo, 2021

In 1975, the then minister of Industry and Trade Severo Gomes asked designer Aloisio Magalhães: “Why isn’t the Brazilian product recognized? Why doesn’t it have a distinct visage?” The designer retorted that “in order to create a distinct visage for -a culture, one must first become familiar with that culture’s reality at different points in time.” ¹ Magalhães’ response eventually went beyond simple words, leading to the inception, that same year, of the National Cultural Reference Center (CNRC), a standalone government entity whose job it was to research, document and publicize Brazilian cultural manifestations. From Triângulo Mineiro folk weaving to Tracunhaém ceramics, from immigrant family-run industries in inland Santa Catarina to midwestern indigenous handicraft, many were the research projects undertaken by the institution.

The CNRC lasted only four years, and there has since been no other state-run program tasked with continuously delving into our country’s cultural wealth. ² Thus, the job fell to the sporadic, scattered efforts of people determined to unveil *Brasil* to *Brasil*—or Brazil, as Elis Regina once sang ³. When it comes to design, this task was not at all encouraged, due to the prevalence of the functionalist current in the first few decades during which the activity internationalized. As per this conception, form follows function alone; therefore, cultural connections aren’t as relevant and needn’t be contemplated in design.

Architecture wasn’t any more welcoming of studies in vernacular tradition either. Dogged opposition to ornaments in any shape or form underpins the country’s own take on the modern school. Formal asepsis was purported to be at odds with the “excesses” of popular housing, which insisted in prettifying itself.

The book *Heartland Brazil* pertains to the actions of people unaffiliated with institutions who went against the mainstream grain. Elaine Eiger does not conceal her direct affiliation with the seminal initiative in this field. Between

1976 and 1995, Anna Mariani went to several localities across Alagoas, Bahia, Ceará, Paraíba, Pernambuco, Rio Grande do Norte and Sergipe photographing house façades. Elaine has been travelling those same seven states since 2013.

In the interim between those two projects, many changes have taken place. The subdued colors obtained through whitewashing have often been replaced with vibrant colors achieved with synthetic paint and ceramic tiles. Platbands—horizontal bands on the upper portion of buildings which conceal the roof—are no longer ubiquitous.

Immediately apparent is the prevalence of industrialized metal frames and safety bars on windows or doorways. In Mariani's photographs, windows and doors are made of wood. Doors often feature cutaways, allowing in air in for ventilation as well as glimpses from passersby. The proliferation of safety bars evidences residents' concerns. This implies that backcountry Northeast villages aren't idyllic havens so much as, on the contrary, *Bacurau*-like places. **4**

But despite the harsh message they convey, they have also become a means of expression for residents. No design is identical to another in the photos I have seen. I wonder about the sample folders of blacksmiths, a profession that's probably in high demand in this area. The iron designs are unique to each home, ornaments whose geometries or meanderings reveal the trajectories of residents' imaginations.

Words written about Anna Mariani's photos still hold true of Elaine's, as far as I'm concerned. Caetano Veloso said that in Santo Amaro, Bahia where he was born, "people will paint their houses every February for the patron saint festivities: it's like getting a new dress. The city becomes all Sunday-like, not unlike the setting of a naïve theater play, each house newly painted. It's simple: it's about joie de vivre, the desire to be prettier. In the eyes of others, in the eyes of God." He also said "the aesthetical impact it gives off certainly confirms and exceeds the sense of overcoming poverty." **5** For the philosopher Jean Baudrillard, what the photographs show is "a pure object born of the conflation

of Northeasterners' graphic expression, luminous and spontaneous, and their poverty and simplicity.” 6

But the words that hit closest to the landscape which Elaine unveils perhaps come from a different context entirely. Throughout 2013, artist and curator Evandro Salles 7 made a photo essay in Rio de Janeiro favelas, paying special attention to the façades. “These are the marks that the images of many of the houses we visited reveal: in the most precarious and adverse of conditions, the subject resists and builds themselves, beauty asserts itself with devastating simplicity. The subject, usurped from their citizenship, abandoned by the State and buried under the industrial waste of emptied objects, withstands this alienating daily massacre by inscribing, with their house-cave, their handwriting, their word, their text-image for the city’s collective, designing a culture that’s unique, for it is deeply their own. Such is the treasure we retrieve at the heart of these constructs of the subject, and which we strive to render visible, a treasure that is the source and meaning of all art-architecture.” 8

Other photographers have produced relevant work on the houses of Brazilian people—this “place of exchange between inside and outside”—within an affordable housing context. As a curator and researcher of Brazilian popular culture, I’ve had the chance to collaborate to render more visible, or rather less invisible, the vast documentation collected by Ruy Facchini across Brazil, by João Urban on the legacy of Polish immigration to Paraná, and by Iêda Marques in the Chapada Diamantina. I’m a great admirer of the work of Francisco Moreira da Costa, through his research trips to the Folk Artist Hall at Rio de Janeiro’s Edison Carneiro Folklore Museum, amassed a great trove of heritage at the Iphan’s National Folklore and Popular Culture Center. Thanks to his ties with the Indian Museum, also in Rio de Janeiro, Milton Guran brought forth the essentiality of the dwellings of several indigenous ethnicities. And the essay by Rochelle Costi featured in the 1998 São Paulo Art Biennial was striking.

All of them—and certainly many others—provide a counterpoint to the photographs of houses designed by professionals and shown in architecture and décor magazines, as well as to the environments featured in Casa Cor exhibits.

They give us mirrors where we can recognize ourselves and be recognized, and that's no small feat. Fortunately, we have witnessed a surge in interest in this kind of heritage. In 2019, Anna Mariani's work was one of the highlights of the show *Géometries Sud, du Mexique à la Terre de Feu*, at Paris' Fondation Cartier. There's growing worldwide recognition of the work of Lina Bo Bardi, whose exhibitions and projects would greatly value popular culture.

Cultural flows no longer originate strictly from the "power hubs" of the Northern Hemisphere and towards the "rest of the world"; they have become multidirectional instead. I have sporadically attended the Milan Design Week since the 1980s, and it's clearly more and more about plurality. The 2018 edition of the London Design Museum's annual prize exhibit devoted a section to designs believed by curator Aric Chen to show that "local is the new global." In his own words, globalization has "made us more sensitive to notions of place," and "in doing so, it created new ways of expressing the local."⁹ Not that Aloisio Magalhães' 1970s and early 1980s actions hadn't ushered in and demonstrated just that.

In Brazil, assertive actions are coming up which espouse a decolonizing, non-Eurocentric vision of culture. Two cases in point would be the relevance of the work done by Adriano Pedrosa since 2015 as art director for the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) and the dialog between knowledge from the peripheries and academia enabled by Universidade das Quebradas (the Hood University), created in 1999 within the Laboratory of Social Technologies at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). Too bad my great friend Lia Monica Rossi didn't live long enough to see her research on Sertanejo Art Deco given its due and published *comme il faut*—but certainly her life and work partner José Marconi Bezerra de Souza, whom I cowrite this book with, will see the endeavor through.

And to wrap up this text, one last thought. In looking at the current images in opposition to Mariani's, some may regret the absence of the Volpi-like grace of former façades. However, all that is alive is eternally changing. The dynamics of culture do not allow expressions to be frozen into a timeframe in order to retain

a supposed authenticity—as if the former façades hadn't themselves been the result of an assimilation of Art Deco, a movement born in Europe. Expecting the “other” to remain stationary while “we” can change is, as I see it, a form of regressive nostalgia and totalitarianism.

If the house is “the boundary that separates and integrates the individual and society,”¹⁰ then the images captured by Elaine Eiger narrate not only the trajectories, fears and desires of their residents, but also a unique moment in our social history. Awareness of their cultural relevance can fuel and enable us to better dream up our future.

Adélia Borges A journalist with a degree from the University of São Paulo, Borges is a critic, a design historian and an independent curator. The author or coauthor of 34 books, she's also a lecturer who has spoken in over twenty countries. Borges has curated exhibits at institutions in Brazil and elsewhere. Since 2016, she is a curatorial advisor to the São Paulo Museum of Art's Store.

1. MAGALHÃES, Aloisio. *E Triunfo? A questão dos bens culturais no Brasil* (What about Triunfo? The question of cultural heritage in Brazil). Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira/Fundação Roberto Marinho, 1997, page 116.
2. An important exception being the Ministry of Culture's embracing of Intangible Heritage listing, in 2000.
3. A reference to the song “Querelas do Brasil”, by Aldir Blanc and Mauricio Tapajós.
4. Film by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles (2019).
5. VELOSO, Caetano, in *Pinturas e Platibandas* (Paintings and Platbands), by Anna Mariani. São Paulo: Instituto Moreira Salles, 2010, page 225.
6. BAUDRILLARD, Jean, in *Pinturas e Platibandas* (Paintings and Platbands), by Anna Mariani. São Paulo: Instituto Moreira Salles, 2010, page 226.
7. Evandro Salles was able to devote himself to this project because he'd won the XII Marc Ferrez Prize from Funarte in 2013. Some of his photographs were shown in a group show curated by Paulo Herkenhoff at the Rio Art Museum (MAR).
8. Texts taken in 2013 from the website moradiapopularbrasileira.com.br, which is currently down.
9. Beazley Designs of the Year exhibition, in a section entitled “The local is the new global.”
10. SALLES, Evandro, in moradiapopularbrasileira.com.br