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Settlements for the Indigenous Population in Portuguese America

Andrey Rosenthal Schlee et Marília Maria Brasileiro Teixeira Vale

Recent questions examining indigenous movements, notably the reconstruction of the histories and identities of groups in search of their rights, as well as the development of ethno-history and interdisciplinary research, has called into question the way in which native Brazilians have traditionally been perceived and their relationship to the colonizer. The concepts and theories pertaining to culture, ethnicity, and otherness and the understanding of culture as an historical product leads to a break with traditional interpretations of contact between indigenous people and European society. A Western perspective prevailed without considering the interference of colonization or the integration of native cultures in the process of occupation and construction of colonial territories.

Historical, anthropological, and ethno-historical contributions are fundamental in enriching our understanding of the processes involved in colonization; however, research related to the field of architecture and urbanism have offered little insight. Two dominant approaches concerning the architecture and indigenous spaces in historiography of Brazilian architecture can be distinguished. The first approach simply ignores indigenous spaces or is not perceived, and its influence on colonial architecture is neglected. In the other, native architecture is considered as seen contemporarily. In the first approach, the historical perspective is derived from Europeans and focuses on the spaces built by and for the colonialist agents. The second has provided limited understanding in improving the comprehension of colonial spaces built for native populations and their integration into colonial society.

The present paper comments on aspects that can inform new frontiers or ideas in the study of colonial urban development and architecture, considering spaces built to accommodate the native population—generally called missions, reductions, or *aldeamentos*.¹

The policy of *aldeamentos* concerned the General Government of Brazil when the Jesuit missionaries arrived in 1549. They offered alternative colonization and cultural

assimilation to native people by restructuring their society.² Conversion to Christianity became easier, and this policy helped dominate and control indigenous groups.

Initially, *aldeamentos* were established near Portuguese settlements along the coast. Indians provided labor and protected the colonization program. In fact, many colonial chronicles and iconographic documents suggest that the first *aldeamentos* were installed in preexisting settlements.

The historiography of the first cities in Brazil suggests that they followed Portuguese urban traditions selecting higher ground in coastal areas that was easily defensible. However, the presence of Indians near Portuguese villages was significant. When the city of Salvador was built, there were six indigenous villages nearby. A Jesuit monastery in the Central Plain that became the city of São Paulo was established due to the fact that there were Indians who could be indoctrinated. Father Manuel de Nobrega stated that, when the Jesuits arrived in that region, there were twelve densely populated *aldeas*.

In the seventeenth century, cattle ranching increased the Portuguese colonial enterprise's territorial expansion west. At the same time, the north became a strategic area to be occupied, protecting the colonial territory against invasions of foreign powers as well as exploiting the existing species in the region. Missionary policy had to adjust to this new perspective and became important for land occupation, as well as enabling whites to populate remote areas. *Aldeamentos* in the hinterland were instrumental in opening up farmland and defense for the colonizers.

Ordinarily, *aldeamentos* were located at river mouths or along riverbanks to control access to the interior and facilitated transportation to harbors for export. They were located near forts along country roads, providing protection and support for travelers.

Essentially, Portuguese legislation regarding natives was oscillatory and contradictory. Some laws gave total freedom to all Indians while others allowed slavery. A more recent interpretation argues that, in fact, this oscillation and contradiction was a pretence.³ Laws were not applied to all Indians indiscriminately. They applied to Indians who resisted colonization violently, and not those considered allies and collaborators.

Settled natives and allies were always guaranteed freedom and a piece of land, and in return the Indians rendered services to the government as well as to the colonizers. The administration of *aldeamentos* had two categories that varied and coexisted throughout the colonial period: the mission—*aldeamentos*—in which the friars were responsible for the spiritual and temporal administration, and those in which the temporal was under an official administrator appointed by civil authorities. Conflicts and disputes between the two models related to controlling the indigenous labor force.

Expectations were that *aldeamentos* would be large, densely populated and self-sufficient. However, this was not always the case. Indians worked in planted fields to support their families, and provide food for the missionaries and administrators. Their land could be leased if it benefited the community.

The work of settled natives was remunerated. There were laws that determined the amounts and ways in which they were to be paid. The length of service varied over time and was distributed so that the settlements might prosper. At all times some settlers remained in the *aldeamento* while others attended to the needs of the colonial administration. Indians went to war, on rescue missions, captured other Indians, and

built roads, forts, and churches while settlers in the *aldeamentos* were given temporary jobs and salaries.

Discrepancies existed between colonial laws and reality. Colonial documents registered complaints of non-compliance of the laws where the indigenous labor force and possession of land were concerned.

The most important urban development project of the Portuguese crown in America during the sixteenth century was the building of the city of Salvador to house the General Government. Jesuit convents were located outside the first wall of the city and this occupation introduced new concepts that were influential on Portuguese urban theory and practice.⁴ The churchyard in front of convents was a regular in form and became the organizational element of the area around it. It was no longer a result of residual spaces and its importance did not stem from the buildings erected in the area—as was the case in traditional Portuguese urbanism—but resulted from its form. Dimensions of convents were also innovative in that they were twice the size of the Town's Council where the most important buildings of the city were located.

This spatial solution adopted by the Jesuits' churchyard was seen in many Indian settlements built by them and other religious orders, as seen in iconographic documents and some surviving examples. The central area of the churchyard was rectangular in shape and other buildings were located around it. The chapel, convent, and school were situated on the short side of the rectangle. On the other sides, Indian homes were organized in rows, following the rectangular shape.

The use of the same organizational principles in the indigenous *aldeamentos* as in Portuguese towns suggests equality and a lack of hierarchy. This is reinforced by maps of the early centuries of colonization. An analysis of seventeenth-century maps suggests that size and not the administrative level of a settlement defined an urban center. *Aldeamentos* were identified in the same way as Portuguese settlements.

Formally, *aldeamentos* were built based on the standards determined by the colonizers, some reports indicate that natives appropriated these spaces and adapted them to their own cultural traditions. Not all homes were built around the central area. Some were built away from this central space, close to planted fields, indicating one form of traditional land occupation used by Indians prior to the arrival of the colonizers. Many etchings and chronicles indicate that the Indians also maintained the tradition of building collective dwellings housing several families as well as the custom of going unclothed.

The presence of a central area or space as a meeting place where celebrations, rituals, and other activities were carried out was an integral element of Indian villages, whether round or rectangular; this could have been one factor that led to the acceptance of the Jesuit model for *aldeamentos*.

Although the Jesuit model is better known and pointed out as the model adopted by other religious orders, iconographic records of *aldeamentos* in the Amazon region indicate that a single spatial solution was not followed, but physical and cultural factors had an influence. There, houses were also built along rivers pointing to its fundamental importance in the life of these settlements. This is one pre-colonial way of organizing space of Amerindian cultures that can still be observed in present day riverside communities.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the project of territorial occupation instituted by the Marquis de Pombal—as part of the process of consolidating the border between Spain and Portugal—brought important changes in Indian policies. Pombal's program included new rules for *aldeamentos*. The objective was to promote physical and social assimilation of the Indians with Europeans and their descendants, providing a labor force that would increase production and consolidate Portuguese ownership of the territory. To this end religious administration of *aldeamentos* was discontinued, and colonizers were encouraged to interact with Indians, interethnic marriages were approved. Indian languages were banned and everyone had to speak Portuguese.⁵ Indigenous *aldeamentos* were established as towns or villages under a local civil government. The native names of the *aldeamentos* were replaced by Portuguese names.

Nevertheless, the disappearance of the *aldeamentos*, both as a particular administrative category and as a physical space, was a process that began at the end of the sixteenth century. Settlements were abandoned when missionaries were no longer present or devastated by epidemics, others due to intermingling of the native and colonial population and the replacement of the indigenous people by colonizers. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, five of the six Jesuit *aldeamentos* around Salvador had already become Portuguese villages.

The nineteenth century was most devastating for the Indians, given that policy discussions geared towards them were discontinued after the Jesuits were expelled. Colonizers were now more interested in ownership of the land that had become more valuable over time. Policies that encouraged intermarriage initiated by Pombal with the express interest of creating a free and homogenous populace would later be the pretext to plunder the lands of the indigenous settlements. After the land legislation of 1850, *aldeamentos* were declared extinct, the reason being that populations in these communities were mixed and not of pure Indian blood. In the northeast, there was a rush to obtain settlement land that led to disputes among municipal, provincial, and central governments.

The violence caused by the contact between Europeans and native Brazilians that brought about the extinction of many groups and the disadvantages to which this population was subjected during the entire colonial time cannot be disregarded. The *aldeamentos* can be taken as epitomizing the colonial project, which enabled indigenous submission and conversion, freed the land for Portuguese occupation and provided the territory's defense as well as the labor force necessary for the colonial economic development. Research into the relationship between Indians and colonizers seeks to understand the Indians' behavior regarding their own interests and motivations that was reformulated by the experience of contact and the colonization process. This analysis assumes assimilation as the only possibility in which the relations between European and Amerindians are considered an irreversible process of domination and continuous cultural loss. Indigenous societies are taken as culturally limited, with a restricted comprehension of the world, non-reactive, submitting passively or reacting violently. New approaches question this interpretation and regard Indians as active participants in the historical process—in making their own decisions and choices in the confrontation with European culture.

In this context, the *aldeamentos* can be considered privileged space of cultural clashes; places where learning and exchanging experiences became possible, which enabled the

integration of Amerindians into the new order by rearticulating and reconstructing cultural identities and values.

Understanding the indigenous matter in the colonial period is not over. We believe that the knowledge and analyses of a wide range of features of these settlements—morphologies, their architectural characteristics, relations with the Portuguese villages and towns, their roles in territorial occupation—as well as the process of change, assimilation, and possible permanence over time can contribute to broadening our understanding of indigenous influence and participation in the history of architecture and urbanism in America.

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NOTES DE FIN

1. The settlements built for the indigenous population in Portuguese colonial America can be identified as reductions or missions but during the eighteenth century the term *aldeamento* was used to distinguish those settlements built under the Portuguese colonial order from those organized by the Indians themselves according to their own cultural traditions, identified as *aldeas*. To maintain this identification, the term *aldeamento* will be used in this paper.

2. Besides the Jesuits, who had a monopoly on the conversion and indoctrination of the Amerindian population for the first thirty years and took a prominent role in defending Indians, other religious orders were widely involved.
3. Beatriz PERRONE-MOISÉS, *Índios livres e índios escravos. Os princípios da legislação indigenista do período colonial (séculos XVI a XVIII)*, in Manuela Carneiro CUNHA, ed., *História dos Índios no Brasil*, São Paulo, 1992, p.117.
4. Manoel TEIXEIRA, *As praças urbanas portuguesas quinhentistas*, in *A Praça na cidade Portuguesa*, Lisbon, 2001, p. 80.
5. These issues were established by a decree known as the *Diretório dos Índios* (Indigenous Directorate) that lasted from 1757 to 1798.

RÉSUMÉS

The investigation and analysis of planned spaces for the reallocation of the indigenous population within the newly imposed Portuguese colonial order have systematically been ignored by the history of Brazilian architecture and urbanism. This paper aims at pinpointing the importance and necessity of what this topic represents for a deeper understanding of the process of territorial structuring and of the construction of colonial urban spaces. It discusses the geographic location, the role of these settlements within the colonial system, their relationship to the Portuguese urban spaces, as well as some of their morphological and architectural features.

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Index géographique : Europe, Portugal, Salvador, São Paulo, Brésil

Mots-clés : architecture coloniale, aldeamentos

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