

Architecture, the Building Trade, and Race in the Early Modern Iberian World

Joaquim Pinto de Oliveira (ca. 1721–1811), known as Tebas, was an important architect of African descent active in São Paulo, Brazil, in the mid-eighteenth century.¹ For some time, however, many scholars questioned his existence, citing colonial Brazil's legislation on architectural activity, which prohibited members of racial and religious minority groups from engaging in the building trade. Yet Tebas had an extraordinarily successful career, including his work as designer and builder of the tower of the Cathedral of São Paulo between 1750 and 1755.² Recent studies illuminate the vital role of African and indigenous populations in the construction of individual buildings as well as whole cities across colonial Central and South America. As Susan Webster's work on Quito demonstrates, Quiteño architects of Amerindian descent not only dominated the building trade but also designed and built some of the most prominent buildings in the city. Similarly, Barbara Mundy's study of Mexico City reveals the significant role played by the Mexica in the architectural and urban development of the viceregal capital of New Spain.³

Indigenous and African architects and their descendants helped to build cities across the early modern Iberian world—that is, the African, Asian, American, and European territories of the early modern Portuguese and Spanish Empires. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, African and indigenous people and descendants thereof made up some 10 to 15 percent of the populations of the port cities of Seville and Lisbon.⁴ The records constantly report their involvement in construction, even if their names are often silenced. Families of Morisco descent, known as New Christians following their conversion from Islam, dominated the building trades in the city of Valladolid. King Philip II of Spain directly supervised the design and development of the Plaza Mayor of Valladolid, including all of its buildings. Following the devastating fire of 1561, expert New Christian masons rebuilt the

city center with the distinctive “Austriaco” or Habsburg-style edifices created during Philip’s reign.⁵

The archive contains notable silences: for example, innumerable colonial records use the indigenous names of architects and masons with the Spanish or Portuguese names they were given when they converted to Christianity. Indigenous and African knowledge is everywhere: the construction materials and technologies of the *bajareque* in New Spain and the *quincha* in Peru are only two examples among many. What social compositions and hierarchies structured the teams working on these sites? To understand architecture in a connected world, created by the labor—intellectual and manual—of enslaved, freed, indigenous, and settler people, we must study trade organizations and social structures as well as the material evidence conveyed by the buildings themselves. Rather than upholding idealized Vasarian notions of the architect, we need to adopt a more multidisciplinary approach, especially in cases like Tebas’s, but also in cases such as those that Webster has uncovered at Quito, where surviving records still document the lives and work of early modern architects and master masons in the building trade.⁶

When researchers encounter a European name in early modern Iberian records, do they assume that the architect or master mason is of a particular race? I explore such questions in my research on early modern Iberian ports known as the “ports of the Indies,” namely, Seville, Havana, Lisbon, and Goa. As the “Rome of the East” and as a major evangelical center in India, Goa was renowned for its rich markets, diverse population, and high-quality architecture. Some of the records on Goa, such as the *Livros dos termos das obras*, include building contracts that record individual names. When I came across these names, I wondered if some or all of the architects, masons, and artists were Goan—that is, descendants of people who lived in the region before the arrival of the Portuguese. Where can we search for further evidence of the “hidden hands” of Goan artists and architects who

contributed to the building of the city?⁷ The multicultural population of Goa is well documented in period accounts. For example, signatures in various European and Asian languages appear in a 1565 contract for an altarpiece in the Church of Santo Agostinho.⁸ The work of cultural and social historians such as Ângela Barreto Xavier, Ines G. Županov, and Ananya Chakravarti provides critical assistance to architectural historians who seek to understand the prominent role played by Goans in the making of the city and the region, as well as its multicultural diversity.⁹

Evidence of the forced labor of enslaved people survives everywhere: for example, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century records for the City Council of Havana reveal that enslaved people of African origin built all the major works in that port city. At a meeting held in 1554, the city councillors discussed prohibiting Black enslaved men and women from building their own independent dwellings or huts. The councillors termed these constructions *bujíos*, which translates as “huts” (*chozas*), or alternatively *bohíos*, a name derived from the Taíno term for wooden and thatched-roof dwelling construction techniques. Of the estimated 5,200 people working in the building trade in Cartagena in Spain in the mid-eighteenth century, only around 1,900 were not enslaved.¹⁰

Although the Vasarian history of art privileges the biographical narrative and intellectual pursuits over manual traditions, in premodern architecture, the cutting of a stone and its positioning in a vault, the preparation of a mixture for a rammed-earth wall, or the construction of the *quincha* or the *bajareque* was as crucial to the success of a building as its architectural design. Such work cannot be defined as “unskilled” labor—a fact that underscores the problems that emerge when we assign such conventional hierarchies in architectural history. Often conservation teams are in awe of the ingenuity of premodern builders, whose construction techniques they find nearly impossible to replicate. African and indigenous intellect, knowledge, and labor are everywhere evident in both colonial and

European settings, and given the crucial importance of architecture in shaping our understanding of past societies, a better understanding of these contributions will enable us to write both a more accurate and a more just history of architecture.

LAURA FERNÁNDEZ-GONZÁLEZ

University of Lincoln

Notes

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2. Abilio Ferreira, ed., *Tebas: Um negro arquiteto na São Paulo escravotra* (São Paulo: Instituto para o Desenho Avançado, 2018).
3. Susan V. Webster, *Quito, ciudad de maestros: Arquitectos, edificios, y urbanismo en el largo siglo XVII* (Quito: Ediciones Abya-Yala, 2012); Barbara E. Mundy, *The Death of Aztec Tenochtitlan, the Life of Mexico City* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015).
4. Carmen Fracchia, “Black but Human”: *Slavery and Visual Arts in Hapsburg Spain, 1480–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1.
5. María del Mar Gómez Renau, “Alarifes Musulmanes en Valladolid,” *Al-Andalus Magreb: Estudios árabes e islámicos*, no. 4 (1996), 223–38.

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6. Barbara E. Mundy and Aaron M. Hyman, “Out of the Shadow of Vasari: Towards a New Model of the ‘Artist’ in Colonial Latin America,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 24, no. 3 (2015), 283–317.
7. See Heta Pandit, *Hidden Hands: Master Builders of Goa* (Porvorim, Goa: Heritage Network, 2003).
8. *Livro dos termos das obras*, 1654–55, Senado de Goa, 7832, Historical Archive of Goa; “Contract for Work in the Altarpiece, of Santo Agostinho, 1565,” *Papeis dos Conventos Extintos*, fol. 5, 3057, Historical Archive of Goa.
9. Ângela Barreto Xavier and Ines G. Županov, *Catholic Orientalism: Portuguese Empire, Indian Knowledge (16th–18th Centuries)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Ananya Chakravarti, *The Empire of Apostles: Religion, Accommodatio, and the Imagination of Empire in Modern Brazil and India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
10. Actas del Cabildo, 28 Jan. 1554, original vol. 1, fols. 99–100, transcribed vol. 1, fols. 88–89, Archivo de la Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad de La Habana; María Teresa Pérez-Crespo Muñoz, *El arsenal de Cartagena en el siglo XVIII* (Madrid: Editorial Naval, 1992), 67.