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Conversing colonial heritage

Inhabiting - inheritance, private ownership, common patrimony and use as form-of-life

Prelude

I am looking for an ideal between private and public, where feelings and affections maintain the same trust and care, in our private conduct as in our public actions. I am proposing a listening in to architecture and history, as entities that have prerogatives. Until we begin listening, inhabiting them as spaces for learning, we will not see them for anything more than mere consumption for our own needs.

Prologue

Exploring in theory and practice the different matrixes of use of colonial heritage, by facing 5 fundamental questions—What does it mean to inherit and own, use, inhabit and touch a piece of valuable heritage?—my research practice explores how this penetration provokes a series of perspectives on how to think inheritance, responsibility and privilege of ownership. Investigating notions of individual and collective rights, this research also considers our relationship to knowledge, to architecture, to heritage and to our own history.

Re-establishing codes of acting upon and relating to heritage, the aim is to develop shared processes through research, dialogue, artistic practices, conservation and experimental practices of preservation. Forms of social responsibility, local and trans-local engagement and exchange, unfold an acknowledging of colonial architecture as an entity beyond our commodified needs, aiming towards a re-assimilation of its heritage in contemporaneity.

Searching for the performative legacy of colonial architecture, through a vernacular character maintained in the built structure, contemporary visions come forward. This contemporaneity that is referenced by a space made in the past, offers insights into architecture, art, history, as a listening in on an atmosphere, its entity, provoking modes of living, working, representing. It reshapes our understandings, meanings and usage of architecture, of heritage, of colonial heritage, and assists us in comprehending and acting upon our own history and its making.

Proposing corporeal, affective relationships in how we relate and respond to a given historical space, the research explores forms of sharing and use—forms-of-life—as more

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open ways of perceiving, living in and caring for heritage, as a present practice of uses beyond ownership, uses that give meaning.

And yet another, spiritual, question: the possibility that I have to really interact, work with, and intervene in a property that is mine, where my history also exists, as a process of emancipation. This should hopefully inspire us to rethink our own positions in history as in the present, and expand our understandings and forms of confronting inheritance and heritage. There is an acute need to develop discourse and practice over the meaning, use, ownership and validation of heritage, to create a system of overthrowing.

Core

Perhaps the most pertinent question to ask when dealing with heritage is: *Why do we still care?* In my case, a very important question is how the act of inheriting an historic house, listed national heritage, unravels a double meaning. In its historical perspective, private ownership and the right to inheritance indicate privilege over others. Private ownership of heritage implicates yet a coarser privilege, which is the appropriation, the consumption of a historical object, as a confiscation of something whose belonging must be constantly negotiated, heritage being a common patrimony, a collective right.

The burden of inheriting colonial heritage is directly connected to the problematic of the private and collective intertwined. By inheriting colonial heritage, and wanting to share this burden, I am problematising (my) privilege. Inherent to this, is the notion of “the privilege of sharing the privilege”, meaning the possibility to decide. (de Sá Cavalcante in conversation). Inherent to the notion of sharing, is the unfolding of an economy of values of ownership. The fact that I own a piece of valuable heritage raises questions about who should and can own heritage, and what to do with it. My privilege, my responsibility. So how to imagine that this responsibility also offers possibilities beyond my own private use?

The challenge is thus: on the one hand, architectural conservation as the material responsibility, care and knowledge of built heritage as evidence of colonial concurrence; and on the other hand, the need for acts of sharing and learning as a way of emancipating and re-positioning heritage and its meaning in present times.

The survival of an atmosphere present in the built heritage is matter to engage and converse with. This surviving matter is the shared, common space between historical concurrence and the practice of engaging with its aftermath and afterlife. These are layers from which to read and learn the world; from here we can haul future impacts.

“Is history something that can be owned? You have to understand the memory of occupation in order to work with history, and to produce a narrative. You own a house, but

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you cannot own its history. Who owns the atmosphere of history?" (de Sá Cavalcante Schuback in conversation).

Abstract

In a time of collaborative methods and decolonising discourses, socio-political and cultural patterns unfold unequal resource- and power structures. Within this reality, my research practice is anchored in an inherited colonial house, listed national heritage in the south of Brazil, exploring its contemporary meaning, performance and legacy through forms of sharing and learning.

Proposing heritage as *shared space* between past and present, the research explores the possibilities for use and contemporary visions heritage offers, and how we are, or can be, reshaped by them in the 21st century.

By interposing the personal and the collective, the practice confronts the responsibility of inheriting colonial heritage as a process of acknowledging ownership, while also tackling the fundamentals of heritage preservation as paradigms of usage and meaningfulness. *What is this heritage, whose heritage is it and what to do with it?*

What is this heritage?

The history of colonialism is always different, one from the other (de Sá Cavalcante Schuback in conversation). The site—the historic colonial Sobrado house—built circa 1840, is located in the Lagoa da Conceicao parish (neighbourhood) on the island of Florianopolis, southern Brazil, as a consequence of the colonial occupation of the island by Luso-Azorean immigrants. Both the house and the old village are today listed national heritage, based on values such as architectural character, typology and setting. The historic cobbled-stone road, church and village overlook the Lagoa da Conceicao (lagoon), where fishing and boat transport were vital elements of the way of life in former times.

In 1987, my family bought the Sobrado from Dona Asinha, who was the last Azorean descendant to own the house. According to some oral records and scattered documents, Dona Asinha had inherited the house from her mother, who in turn inherited from her mother, who before her inherited from her mother. Other records say that the house was commissioned by a priest, built as a present to his lover's family. The young woman was said to have the only room with a window to the outside, whereas daughters traditionally slept in window-less alcoves. Back in '87, the room was easily identified because of a trapdoor cut out into the wooden boards, leading down into a hole big enough to fit a person. This was proof enough to

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turn the rumour into myth, but of its veracity I am not at all certain. The Sobrado and its stories are still identified by descendants of the Luso-Azorean community who feel connected to its former uses and owners, while also by new incomers who have no direct mnemonic ties to the house, but a relationship to its historicity.

In 2016, I was exploring a newly published book of archived photographs of historic Florianopolis, and came across a description of a *soirée blanche*, a festivity that goes on all night long until the day rises. This description dated back to the beginning of the 1900s, and was set in the location or vicinity of what seemed to be the Sobrado. The story of the *soirée* told me of the kind of social gathering people from that community experienced, making explicit some of the social structures upon which that colonised south based itself, in particular the area that conjugates the Sobrado house and the Freguesia da Nossa Senhora da Conceicao (parish). There, a generous host is described, welcoming community members as well as outsiders, offering them lavish foods, dancing and games until sunrise. It is said that places remember what people forget.

In a southern Brazilian context, the colonial past imprints landscapes that speak of slavery, and even ransacking of native *carijó* culture. Though the cobbled stone road that connects the Sobrado to the church on the hilltop is said to have been laid by slaves, much like the church itself, it is important to highlight that the Azorean couples who populated and established the Lagoa parish in the mid 1700s were of modest background and underwent considerable struggle for survival, working the land and fishing.

I have heard that the Azorean immigrants were always in hope of better times, always waiting for that time to begin. (also Dezo and sister in conversation). A nostalgia that lives perhaps in all settlers, all those who have left their origins behind. “There are things that pass and don’t come back. But the seed is something very big, isn’t it? It canalises”. (de Haro in conversation). I am not an Azorean descendant, and every time I stay in the house, those thick walls creating a peculiar, unique interior atmosphere, I wonder if all this is really mine to inherit. There has been, after all, a sequence of generations inhabiting this house. (Aninha in conversation). Generations that are not my blood, but that tell me of the place I come from. So this is, after all, also my heritage.

Coinciding with the 2017 listing of the cultural belt that includes 13 other buildings and the Sobrado house, there was an urgency to shed light on the degradation of the surrounding community and landscape. The hastened process of erratic urbanisation and real-estate exploitation, and consequent need for (re) positioning the meaning (fullness) of heritage—its social anchorage, relations and identification, atmosphere, identity, knowledge and

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symbolism—highlighted a gap to be bridged between history and contemporaneity, between past and present.

“The transformation of the society and landscape of Lagoa happened in a short span of time. Until the mid-20th-century, the locality maintained the same formations of the Freguesia founded by the Azoreans, though its population had increased. From the 1970s onwards, the process of division of traditional land-tracts gained momentum and produced a significant change in the landscape. The logic of land division is thus transformed, and private property takes the lead of urban growth as a new landscape is designed”. (Vaz).

The heritage that represented the daily patterns exercised by the specific community of this place, their rapports of assimilation and signification between the built and non-built, and the creation of the spirit that defined it, faces an erasure that enforces its praxis: a history not told, a heritage not acknowledged, and a systematic perpetuation of disparities.

When it comes specifically to listed heritage, we are framed by statutes defined by the National Heritage board, which aim to safeguard a continuity that goes beyond ourselves. In a Brazilian context, this is in itself a problematic to be solved, as demands are bestowed upon heritage owners without further structures for financial or technical support. Knowledge of vernacular building traditions and use of materials are scarce, and dialogue between national heritage authorities and private heritage owners is close to absent.

It is important to highlight here the notion of “the State as an empty form (Benjamin) that regulates the private, which in its turn, takes the position of the State as care taker - not in deciding value (authorized heritage) but here looking for alternative categories: uses, ownership and sharing. There is a dislocation here, of the private administrating public use, and paradoxically, how much this can implicate an ownership of that which is public”. (de Sá Cavalcante Schuback in conversation).

Whose heritage is it?

Heritage manifests itself in the memory and assimilation of the past embodied in historical objects, acting on both personal and collective levels. If we consider this embodiment, the contemporary survival and potential performance of heritage (Smith), as matter to interact with, processes of identification and construction of meaning between private and common can be generated.

In “*Commemorative dis(re)membering: erasing heritage, spatializing disinheritance*”, Michael Landzelius offers a view of heritage and identity as entities that criticize an authorized narrative of claiming them as solely constructed in the past. Proposing a “rhizome

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history of disinheritance” as alternative to an identity ready to be claimed, he suggests instead anchorage in “struggles of the present”.

Acting on the belief that the contemporary performance of the colonial legacy today offers a site for inhabitation and renegotiation of values pertinent to local and global communities, the confrontation of seemingly contradictory aspects within heritage—on one side heritage as common patrimony, and on the other side its private management—is a tool for work. This dual aspect of the work means articulation of public and personal interests, as interwoven responsibilities. There is a spiritual and a political dimension, both to be acknowledged as ways to rethink private property and land, with heritage as a culprit for that dialogue. There is also the proposition of a greater ecology, the body of the past, as pluriverse (Mignolo, Hardt) values to be dug afresh, meaning an *inhabiting* of the borderland past and present. If we propose heritage as a set of knowledges, memories, biographies, material and immaterial values, as a pluriverse entity, then confronting private ownership of heritage means acknowledging this pluriversality as certain rights, beyond the private.

Private property and the common

In his talk “*Property law and the common*”, Michael Hardt offers a definition of private property as “a monopoly over use and decision making to the exclusion of all others.” He goes on to say that, “cracks are appearing in the ideology of private property and possession, as property is unable to support either our economic needs or our political passions. This notion defies the use of property.” Particularly valuable to the research is the notion that use can redefine property. Hardt expands, “property implicates plural and incommensurable values, and that plurality forces us to reject all purely individual concepts of property”. He brings the notion of “social goods, sharing of immaterial forms of wealth, codes, ideas, images, common knowledges as fields of the affirmation of the commons; life-forms as immaterial forms of property that are inevitably social.” He goes on to say that “by increasing this notion of plurality, property ceases to become private.” Hardt defines the common as “that which is not property”, as that which “entails equal and open access, where management is the active element of its sustainability” (Hardt/Ostrom).

What to do with it?

If we are to embrace the plurality inherent to heritage, then heritage ownership and use cannot be distinguished from the people, landscape, history, atmosphere, myths, expectations, memory and identification, or context of the site. *What does it mean to own and what does it*

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mean to use? What does it mean to use beyond ownership? And what does it mean to use, in dialogue with and inhabiting the layers that already exist in a given space and place? To find agency over our own history as a means of exchange; not appropriation or commodification, but as subtle and profound experiences? Can this use be considered a form-of-life? Can different forms of sharing and of use of heritage, offer processes of aperture between private and common?

A form-of-life

Shaping a theory, practice and philosophy of uses through constituencies built locally and internationally, my research explores the recomposing of meaning through use. A *form-of-life* develops as relationships of interacting with and responding to a given history, space and place; its atmosphere, materials, vistas; its architectural matrix; the movements of the social fabric beyond the threshold of the walls; the landscape.

The physical, material simplicity of the architectural program offered by the house in the past is a way towards the legitimisation of its spaces today: a vernacular, constructive culture connected to the concurrence of migration, its artisanal colonial tradition and its confrontation with the natural and original world of the colony. Making use of the historical matrix available in the built structure of the Sobrado house, the research acknowledges a material logic, and a logic of use, that deals with a typology and surviving atmosphere that were not made today.

These vernacular building translations, which come from the colonial past all the way into our Brazilian contemporary, are connected to the atmosphere felt to this day in the house. In that sense, architecture is a presence, an atmosphere. In “*Experimental Preservation: The Potential of Not-Me Creations*”, Otero-Pailos uses David Gissen’s notion of “atmospheres”, as “an articulated realm extending between and through objects and subjects.” As a consequence of centuries of use, applied materials, handmade fabric, smell, low level of infra-structures/technologies, the atmosphere and spirit of a place are spatial qualities found between the built and non-built.

When Laurajane Smith, in her introductory lines to “*Uses of Heritage*”, asks, “What has sitting on the banks of the Gregory River in far northern Queensland fishing to do with heritage?”, she embracing heritage’s inherent *forms-of-life*, connecting use and meaning to site. Smith challenges the traditional Western idea of heritage, all too often “used to promote an unchallenging consensual view of both the past and the present.” Alternatively, she develops heritage through the concepts of memory, performance, identity, intangibility, dissonance and place. Smith reflects on the concept of performance of heritage as a practice

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of constructing and giving meaning, as embodied interactions of everyday life. “Heritage performance are not only physical experiences of “doing”, but also emotional experiences of “being”. (...). Moreover, the performance of preservation and curation is itself a performative statement which constructs the objects or “props” utilized in this performance as “heritage””.

In “*The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and form-of-life*”, Agamben challenges ownership by proposing use as a way of living, *forms-of-life* beyond appropriation, and use beyond property, as *a giving meaning to*. An inhabiting that is not only imposing use, but a listening in of an atmosphere, its entity and the lessons it can offer us, which challenge a re-learning, and offer a resistance, an assuming of a certain condition. A *condition* that trespasses the specificity of time, and makes it malleable. Such qualities that linger between material and immaterial are what the practice/discipline of experimental preservation has been embracing as cultural heritage, beyond official, authorised narratives.

But what is a *form-of-life*? It is the way of living specific to an individual, or group, where life itself cannot be distinguished from the means to live. Because spaces were built for certain reasons, and people were living it in certain ways, these *forms-of-life* inherent to heritage sites, though mutated, transformed and not mimicked today, impregnate what is experienced even now.

A way of working

The research develops as a theory and text that is linked to actions in the Sobrado house and beyond it, evolving a larger ecology that includes intersection between theory and practice as well as dialogues with other sites, as the condition for work.

The process of sharing and learning, as a process of interaction with the collective, comes through acts of inhabiting, as the mapping of local manual knowledge and biographies, experimenting with an artist/artisan-in-residence program, developing applied restoration rounds, pedagogical interventions, public acts and gatherings, conversations and study sessions, archival actions, and walks - transforming the house into a place for knowledge production, understanding knowledge as a process of *being in*, listening, dialoguing and reflecting. Through this, the aim is to rebind the meaning of heritage, shaping a contemporary community that draws bridges between the times of the house and the world today. *Forms-of-life* are thus explored at and through the Sobrado house, generating insight and dialogue for the Sobrado as well as other sites and practices. A critical practice is developed through self-reflection and how it relates to the notion of heritage in this specific site, in this location, on this island of Brazil. Moreover, this is a critical practice of management and care, of positioning history and ourselves in history, and of dialoguing as a way of building

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community. Locals' stories are invited in, artists and artisans inhabit the spaces of the house. There is an exchange with other research and practices, with those who have been trying to answer similar and pertinent questions, with those who have the openness to become involved. Conversing, inhabiting, and cultivating different conversations with physical and symbolic communities involved, and articulations that derive from them.

The historical body – acts of preservation, mapping and learning

Giving back the equilibrium of the Sobrado house as heritage object implicates its spatial and material essence: Not necessarily in the historical memory of a time passed, but in a material and spatial essence of its original matrix. In terms of volume and character. Returning it to the present urban landscape, while redeeming and reconfiguring its character. A structure that utilizes itself of memory to liberate itself from layers of time that hid its character, and in this, find possibilities.

Volume and character, found in its past matrix, map and apply through preservation work, local manual knowledge and vernacular building traditions. In practice this means the collation and activation of vernacular building traditions and local artisans as a process of engagement. This generates space for pedagogical structures where others feel ownership to the place by getting to know it by hand (Langdalen in conversation).

The practice also involves collecting documents and oral narratives, as sources for articulation of local biographies. Allowing for the mapping of affinity and reciprocity zones between material and immaterial heritage. These acts are connected to walks, talks and gatherings, where different sharing and learning structures organise. Local biographies, as well as archival processes, allow for the development of the historical background of the Sobrado house and its setting. Expanding through the storytelling of the house, local people, and dialogues beyond site, means history and micro-history come together, today.

Intervention - A contemporary layer

The current architectural program proposed in collaboration with Brasil Arquitetura, is a contemporary layer in dialogue with the vernacular, and sustains the liberation of prior interventions, while progressively making the historical house more visible and available, more evident. All new interventions serve the purpose of enabling further access to the built heritage, and clearer connectivity with its historical and natural surroundings.

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Sharing typology

Maintaining privacy and degrees of the private. Though no longer necessarily a home, the Sobrado is a house. A house where one recognises symbols that make a house – its windows, doors, a cupboard, a bed, a table, a coffee cup – and which we all share. With three clear spaces, the intersections between public and private, personal and collective, and the semis/in-betweens that form, are zones for great negotiation. Actions that make use of a capacity offered by the specific typology of the Sobrado house, such as the relationship between the sidewalk and the old commerce, offer a lost historic rapport, the relationship of the public, which this typology once objectified. The space of the sidewalk as an essential element in the sociocultural relation of this place, was traditionally the space for interaction, a space of meeting between families, a continuation of the private, the place of conversation. These spaces are opened as spaces for inhabitation, where an experimental artist/artisan residency is organised, and other collective actions and gatherings such as food-making, local meetings, acts of listening, and conversations.

The aim is to give time for interaction with the house, as interrelation and affection. An unfolding where an intimacy is slowly built, where the personal weaves new memories with the house, hauling past and present, overlapping histories, generating counter-narratives. Layers of gestural interaction, engender agency between the historical house and the digging afresh of meanings, rhythms of interaction.

Grounded on the premise that the colonial house can enact a form of insurgence through experiences and forms of daily living in and with its heritage, the research practice recharges possibilities to share, penetrate, learn, live, experience, validate and legitimise its historic matter in contemporaneity. The process of sharing and learning of (our) heritage is a way towards possibilities to challenge, renegotiate and be engaged in shaping it, shaping ourselves and the local and global communities involved in its unfolding.

Epilogue

There is frequently something that catches our attention. Yesterday was the scene of the removal of the last scaffolding, which supported the restoration work of the roof of the house. It was a spectacle that almost no one witnessed. The sounds of disassembly, metal and planks. And suddenly the white facade appeared. Much is said about lime. This very old material, which reminds us of Mediterranean houses. But you don't always really see the actual lime in restoration work. What we see are mixtures, which in fact remove from lime its true characteristics. But this one here is super white and made of pure lime. It contains no

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additives. Only thin white-washed layers, in all there were eight coats, which form a whole. In the end, it looks like a veil. After much manual work to remove the recent layers of plastic paint, it was possible to reach the plaster. We recovered the entablature, made of several friezes, some already covered, but still practically intact the lime-based whitewash throughout the facade. The end result is amazing.

But another less noticeable fact caught my attention. It is the recovery that is being made in the space, extending west into the house. This space (of which the past purpose is not exactly known, though there are records suggesting that part was a rammed-earth-floor kitchen) was greatly disfigured, internally and externally, by the openings, which took away its more modest, vernacular character, and also due to the obstruction of part of its base, where two small slits provided ventilation under the floor. When we removed the obstructions, the ventilation of the basement below was recovered. Despite having a very low height, the basement could be used to store work material. The bricklayer then took tiles leftover from the restoration, and began setting them up neatly, one by one, being careful to leave ventilation channels between the tile blocks. As I entered this space, I did not realise this care, but I felt that something had been meticulously thought out. There seemed to be some kind of movement in that sequence of tiles, spaces, and penetrating air. It is certainly something very simple, but of immense value. These are simple gestures, these manual workings, but they leave something ethereal in the architectural spaces, and they are increasingly disappearing.

What I do

Currently researching under Decolonizing Architecture at RIA Stockholm, as a practitioner with a background in architecture, visual arts, and crafts, I have been developing processes of cultural practice through dialogue between making, thinking, people, cultures, places and times. This work is further explored as writings, actions, interventions, workshops and talks.

Since 2015, in collaboration with ISCEAH/ICOMOS member architect Isabel Kanan, my practice has been embedded in the historic colonial Sobrado house, developing the re-assimilation of this heritage into contemporaneity. The research-based practice engages the architecture as an embodied non-static legacy to be articulated, through experiences of immersion and local/trans-local contact, as interacting and interceding forms between times and histories, identities and notions of community. Working with safekeeping by caring for the space as both material structure and living heritage, as an expanded body, we explore its contemporary performance as possibilities to share, penetrate, learn, and validate this space.

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