

**A ATEMPORALIDADE DO PROCESSO DE CRIAÇÃO DO ARQUITETO  
LUCIO COSTA: O PAPEL DO PRECEDENTE NA SUA CONCEPÇÃO  
ARQUITETÔNICA**

*The atemporality of the architect Lucio Costa creative process: the role of precedent  
in his architectural conception<sup>1</sup>*

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**Abstract**

This paper aims to interpret, critically, the published written work of the architect Lucio Costa and investigate, as main focus, the crucial role that the precedent assumes in its conception. In this context, the article intends to demonstrate that Lucio Costa's projectual process is atemporal, and can be better investigated and applied to contemporaneity. To complement the findings, it was necessary to analyze one of the projects of his authorship that contained a descriptive memorial, which was chosen for Parque Guinle, aiming to recognize the inseparability between thought and projectual practice in Lucio Costa. His published written work is recognized by several authors as being of great importance in the context of the insertion of modern architecture in Brazil. His texts became a landmark of theoretical foundation for design practice and influenced many architects who worked in the period between approximately the 1930s and 1960s in Brazil.

**Resumo**

O presente artigo tem como finalidade interpretar, criticamente, a obra escrita publicada do arquiteto Lucio Costa e investigar, como foco principal, o papel crucial que o precedente assume em sua concepção. Neste contexto, o artigo pretende demonstrar que o processo projetual de Lucio Costa é atemporal, podendo ser melhor investigado e aplicado na contemporaneidade. Para complementar as constatações, fez-se necessário analisar um dos projetos de sua autoria que continha memorial descritivo, cujo escolhido foi o Parque Guinle, objetivando reconhecer a indissociabilidade entre pensamento e prática projetual em Lucio Costa. Seu trabalho escrito publicado é reconhecido por vários autores como de grande importância no contexto da inserção da arquitetura moderna no Brasil. Dessa maneira, seus textos tornaram-se um marco de fundamentação teórica para a prática projetual e influenciaram diversos arquitetos que atuaram no período compreendido, aproximadamente, entre as décadas de 30 e 60, no país.

**Key-words:** *architecture, Lucio Costa, creation process, precedent, history.*

**Palavras-chave:** *arquitetura, Lucio Costa, processo de criação, precedente, história.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The field of study of this article lies within the scope of the writings published by the architect and urban planner Lucio Costa (1902-1998), submitted to a critical reading that will progressively delimit the thematic focus which refers to the role of precedent in the architectural conception of Lucio Costa.

The relevance of the Brazilian master's written work is widely recognized and its choice as an object of study needs no comment. From the beginning, this investigation was interested in the notable repercussion of the theoretical foundation proposed in it for the practice of modern architecture in Brazil, which influenced generations of architecture students and professionals, particularly in the pioneering moment of the first realizations, marked by profound uncertainties and transformations in the society and architectural production.

The set of articles on modern architecture bequeathed by Lucio Costa became a milestone in the development of the Modern Movement in Brazil and consolidated its position as an intellectual leader in the introduction and affirmation of new architecture (as it was called then) in Brazil. In his writings, a singular and differentiating role is played by the constant mention of the erudite tradition and the popular tradition, presented as part of the same historical phenomenon.

Lucio Costa reveres the leading role, in architectural production, of precedents arising from any of these traditions, in the sense of creating links and, thus, harmoniously assisting the transformations that were to come. All this, without drastic ruptures, without failing to value what the man of the past conquered and that can be reused. Costa's design process, to be reflected in this article, connecting his theory with his practice, demonstrates a timeless knowledge, capable of inspiring and influencing the inexorable evolution of architecture.

## **CONTEXT: THE SINGULAR ROLE OF LUCIO COSTA**

Lucio Costa (1902-1998), architect and urban planner, graduated in 1922 from the National School of Fine Arts in Rio de Janeiro. Born in France to Brazilian parents, he was educated in Europe until he was fourteen years old, when he returned to Brazil. His academic training was developed along the lines of the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, a fact that was initially reflected in his career.

In this way, it is observed that Costa had a classical education, within the molds of the *École des Beaux-Arts*, adopting as mandatory reading the book by Julien Guadet (1834-1908), professor and theorist at the same school, who wrote, in four volumes, the work entitled *Éléments et Théories de l'Architecture*. Such findings raise important clues as to his proposal to reform teaching at the National School of Fine Arts (ENBA), in Rio de Janeiro. The text whose title is called "ENBA", written in 1931, when he was invited to direct it, proves to be his first publication that really focuses, in its content, on an approach that connects the importance that Costa gave to the study of the precedent, mentioning the erudite tradition and the popular tradition in the context of architecture, evidenced through arguments that mark his concern in knowing both traditions in depth.

Therefore, he states, in that text, that the architecture student must learn from the ancients what is perennial with regard to the discipline of architecture - its rules of composition coming from an erudite tradition and its elements still valid to be applied in the present, derived from popular tradition. All these considerations by Costa, regarding the role of precedent in his conception, must be related to a "plastic intention" that demonstrates a "constructive truth", free of superficial adornments and properly inserted in the environment and that represents the era that belongs to him.

Therefore, Costa's view on the role of precedent partly reflects some influences of the master Guadet, that is, with regard to the search for great examples in the history of architecture, with the aim of extracting compositional laws and principles from them, in the acceptance the nomenclature relating to composition rules, architectural elements and composition elements, and their respective purposes in the parts that make up the whole of a project in which such solutions come from the study of precedent. However, regarding the teaching of the *École*, propagated by the master Guadet in the sense of seeking, in the precedent, elements of architecture for a merely decorative application that triggered the so-called eclectic style, Costa refutes it, because for him the elements of architecture must exercise a actual function of being.

However, such a posture adopted, from the 1930s onwards, is in opposition to the one he himself had been taking, as well as the vast majority of architects in that period. In this sense, they developed projects based on historical styles from Eclecticism and Neocolonialism.

Costa breaks with this design posture and begins to outline ideas linked to modernism. Lucio Costa, therefore, begins with a discourse on the renewal of architecture with the publication of the text “Reasons for New Architecture”, in 1934. In this text, Costa argues that that was a moment of paramount importance, which would be directly connected to the new era that began due to the industrial revolution and that the secret of the new architecture would be, precisely, in the understanding of the independent structure system. Such finding proposed to all architects a review of their concepts, emphasizing that a period of great transformations was to come, of evolution and not of rupture.

Thus, he once again affirms the importance of the past as a source of knowledge in what sustains and enables the architecture discipline: “Because, if the forms varied – the spirit is still the same, and the same laws remain fundamental” (COSTA, 1995, p. 116). The text “Razões da Nova Arquitetura”, in which Costa’s focus is on references to the erudite tradition, became a landmark that ended up theoretically substantiating the changes that architectural production in Brazil underwent, in particular, his own work, in the sense of enabling changes in relation to the postures previously used by a significant part of the architects, mainly in the crucial role that the precedent will have in its conception, both theoretical and demonstrated in its creation process. No livro “Lucio Costa: sobre arquitetura”, Edgar Graeff makes an important report in the introductory note, the first edition of which was published in 1962. Graeff comments on the importance of Costa's written work, highlighting his thought, stating that it is timeless and fundamental to be read and analyzed at any time, a valuable lesson in architecture. In his own words:

when, after 30 years, we read “Reasons for New Architecture” again, we find an explanation for this persistence: Lucio Costa's dialectic does not crystallize into a conclusion. His thinking does not pursue a rule, a norm, a law or a formula. It is a living thought, carrying germs of new thoughts. The equation he seems to close in an answer raises ten other questions. Your idea is not like the stone marker – it is like the source: it occupies a place in space, it is a support, it guides, but it flows in time. Does not absorb - radiates. It renews itself in the intelligence of those who touch it. Hence, certainly, the perennial relevance of Lucio Costa's work. This collection, for that very reason, has nothing of a documentary of the past. It is offered to us as a living instrument for interpreting the present and building the future. (GRAEFF, 2007:6-7)

The opinions that Graeff expresses about Costa's role in the architectural context, remind us of the figure of a great master of architecture. Thus, regardless of time, his thought will remain perennial, recorded in his written work and in his projects and built architectural works, through a deep theoretical knowledge in which his arguments that base his creation process can be studied and applied in any time, taking into account, of course, the social, cultural context and current technologies.

Costa claims to have studied the most current works of that period, such as those by Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe and, in particular, the doctrine and work of Le Corbusier. However, it is observed that the concrete influence of Le Corbusier's doctrine occurred with his visit at the invitation of Costa to guide the Brazilian team in the project of the Ministry of Education and Public Health (MESP), current Capanema Palace, in Rio of January. Based on Le Corbusier's original design for another site, the consolidation of this project marked the insertion of new architecture in Brazil and on the international scene, with the construction of the MESP headquarters building.

The entire development of the project, begun in 1936 and only inaugurated in 1945, including construction details and monitoring the execution of the work, was carried out by the team of Brazilian architects who, together with Lucio Costa, no longer consulted Le Corbusier. Costa says that what could not be done in the proposed reform for the National School of Fine Arts was implemented in the project and execution of the Ministry of Education and Public Health.

Another text considered of fundamental importance in the 1930s was “Necessary Documentation”, written in 1937, which addresses the architecture of colonial popular tradition, stating that we are interested in getting to know popular architecture in Portugal better, to a greater extent than its origins. erudite architecture, as it is in the first that simple architecture is found, in the form of the roots of Brazilian colonial architecture.

In this text, Costa establishes a series of relationships between popular tradition architecture in Portugal and its influence in colonial Brazil, presenting a fundamental relationship between the wattle and daub construction technique, present more in rough terrain, as in the Brazilian states of Minas Gerais and Rio de Janeiro, which constitutes a structure independent of the fences and which provides a certain distance from the ground. It also manages to envision a direct association with the new technology provided by reinforced concrete, that is, independent structure and pilotis. It even mentions that this association was proposed for the project in Monlevade, in 1934:

in fact, the ingenious process they are made of – clay reinforced with wood – has something similar to our reinforced concrete and, with due care, moving the floor away from the ground and properly whitewashing the walls to avoid moisture and the “barber”, should be adopted for summer houses and economic constructions in general. That's what we tried to do for the working-class village of Monlevade, near Sabará, at the invitation of Companhia Siderúrgica Belgo-Mineira – the project was not taken seriously, as you can see. (COSTA, 1995, p. 458-459)

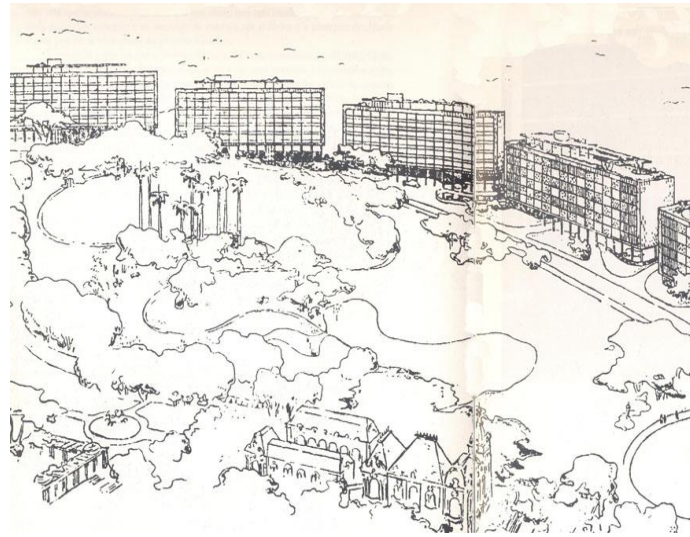
In the text “SPHAN (Serviço do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional)”, Costa states that the entire process of transformation triggered by modern architecture was based on the renewal of elements considered still relevant, arising from popular tradition, and this fact is a constant concern among all those involved “in Brazil, both in 22 and 36, those committed to renovation were the same committed to 'preservation', when elsewhere, at the time, they were people of antagonistic background and opposed” (COSTA, 1995, p. 437) . It is observed, therefore, that all the knowledge acquired in his work by SPHAN was considered essential for the foundation of his theory and design practice. From his interest in studying and critically analyzing the precedent in relation to the elements of architecture and composition, considered by Costa to be expressively relevant, as well as their association, conceived from popular traditional techniques, to the techniques of reinforced concrete.

### **PARQUE GUINLE: THEORY AND PRACTICE INDISSOCIABLE**

The text entitled “Parque Guinle”, written in the 1940s, deals with the memory of this project, present in the book “Registro de uma Vivência” by Lucio Costa. The presentation of this text aims to provide elements that allow an analysis, in order to verify the strength perceived in Costa's references to the role of precedent in the creation of new architecture and its reflection in his design practice, demonstrating the inseparability with his speech theoretical.

Parque Guinle, built on the initiative of Cesar Guinle, was the first residential complex of apartments for the upper class in Rio de Janeiro which adopted, also in an innovative way, in the case of this type of work, one of the most outstanding principles of Le Corbusier – the stilts, in other words, leave the ground floor empty, this solution, the first to be used in a residential building in Brazil, but which over the years ended up becoming usual in the city of Rio de Janeiro and others across the country, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Deployment sketches initially proposed by Lucio Costa.



**Source:** Costa, 1995.

Lucio Costa's original project for Eduardo Guinle Park foresaw the construction of six buildings, of which only three were built: the Nova Cintra building, Bristol and Caledonia. The Bristol and Caledonia buildings have an unfavorable orientation, facing west; to protect these facades, Costa alternates brise-soleil and cobogó, internally featuring a sequence of loggias.

In the Nova Cintra building, as it is connected by Rua Gago Coutinho more to the city than to the park itself, it has commercial galleries on the ground floor. Its solar orientation is north-south, with an entirely glazed facade. The three buildings have similar floor plans, varying in size and type (simple and duplex). In his proposal, there is a concern with the preservation of the Guinle family mansion, as well as with the park designed in 1916 by the landscaper Cochet

. The following text attests to this:

I therefore advised a contemporary architecture that would adapt more to the park than to the mansion, and that the elongated, six-story buildings would be detached from the ground and have “loggias” along the entire length of the facades, with various types of sunshades, since they faced the west. It was the first set of buildings built on stilts and the foreshadowing of Brasília's superblocks. (COSTA, 1995, p. 205).

Costa's design posture, when implementing the residential complex Parque Guinle, starting from the principle of creating buildings that contrasted with the existing mansion on the site, values both the past and the present, characterized by new plastic forms resulting from the new technology. And, in this aspect, such a design posture becomes consistent.

Costa's writings make references to elements of composition, that is, the articulation of the internal volumes of the buildings of the Brazilian popular tradition of the colonial period. And looking at the solution at Parque Guinle, Costa puts it into practice. This means that Costa will not always reinterpret only technical solutions or materials used in the past, although at Parque Guinle, Costa also resumes and reinterprets the traditional use of cobogós, as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2:** Composition of the facade with the introduction of cobogós.



**Source:** Costa, 1995.

Comas, when analyzing the Guinle Park project, mentions the precedents observed in this project, arising from the erudite and popular tradition:

on the façade facing the street, along offices, living rooms or bedrooms, the fixed glass sills of the sash windows descend to the floor, with the inner face painted in a beautiful blue over cobalt, another colonial reminiscence. The walls are clad in stone and are pierced by a vertical row of square windows that correspond to the bathrooms at the ends of the middle range of the plan. On the facade overlooking the park, the gallery at each end, corresponding to three rooms in the private sector, is protected with hollow concrete panels on the second floor and ceramics on the others. The extreme panels are interrupted by a central square opening whose frame is a vestige of a window and a screen to lean on and enjoy the landscape. Luis Nunes' cobogó at the Olinda Water Reservoir wins muxarabi forums. The three adjacent service modules are protected with larger hollow concrete elements on the second floor and with painted vertical asbestos cement slats on the others, rigidified by a horizontal piece at the height of the parapet. Between the two stairwells, asbestos cement slats alternate vertically in front of the service areas and hollow element panels in front of the intimate sector galleries. The white, square mesh that frames the panels and their openings does not fail to express empathy with the Terragni of Casa del Fascio and Casa Rustici, or, closer, with Rino Levi of the Philosophy Institute. The pastel colors and the interplay of lacy textures enliven the galleries that the climate provides and orientation calls for. (COMAS, 2002, p. 276)



When analyzing Comas' citation, one perceives the variety of references that this author points out as possible precedents on which Costa may have based his proposal and which go beyond the mere influence of LeCorbusier. Also noteworthy is Costa's reinterpretation of the use of cobogós and muxarabis from the Portuguese colonial popular tradition, mentioned by him in several of his texts. This thought makes it possible to attest again that in Costa's architectural conception, the role of precedent becomes fundamental and inseparable from his theory.

His experience at SPHAN, his surveys and meticulous studies carried out during his travels throughout Brazil, helped him to understand the evolution of the Brazilian house from the colonial period to the present day. Therefore, evolutionary influences are observed in the structuring of his theory and design practice, for example, when analyzing the descriptive memorial of Parque Guinle, in which Costa addresses all the phases of the evolution of the Brazilian house and reinterprets them to apply them in the project in question.

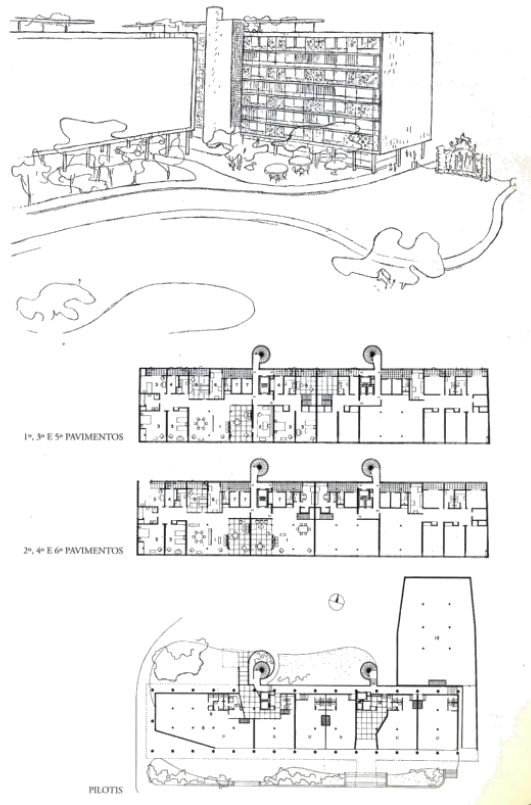
In this project, according to Costa, there was another expressive intention, which was not recognized by its users: to seek in the precedent arising from the Portuguese colonial popular tradition, referring to the configuration of the plans of traditional Brazilian houses, characteristics that were reused as the use of the two balconies, the social and the home porch, for the social porch, located at the front, to receive people, and the home porch, related to the intimate use of the house, at the back, connected to the dining room, bedrooms and service.

it was the essence of this traditional scheme that was intended to be revived in the apartments in Parque Guinle: a kind of winter garden, adjacent to the living room and a room with no specific destination, connected to the bedrooms and the service; one more formal and the other more at ease, thus corresponding to the homemade veranda. But the brokers did not know how to sell the idea, and thus the opportunity to recover this still valid party, and reestablish the bond, was lost. (COSTA, 1995, p. 212)

Critically analyzing the proposal for Parque Guinle, it is clear that it reinterprets the layout of traditional Brazilian houses, as shown in Figure 3. The text on this project addresses the historical evolution of the precedent arising from the popular tradition of Portuguese colonization, demonstrating that its projects always present consistent theoretical foundations. Once again, Costa, in his design practice, makes references to the precedent, when he revives, in the assembly of the plans, elements of composition, such

as the use of balconies (social and domestic) and architectural elements, such as cobogós and muxarabis, highlighting both solutions as coming from a popular Portuguese colonial tradition. Also, there are design solutions arising from an erudite tradition based on rules of composition, such as the use of modulation systems (to structure pillars, walls and openings), schemes of scale and proportion suitable for residential use, clear tripartition systems of volumes (permeable base given by the pilotis, body defining greater volume and crowning by the platband). All inserted in the new technology of reinforced concrete.

**Figure 3:** Proposed spatial organisation through the floor plans.



**Source:** Costa, 1995.

It is observed, therefore, that Costa, when putting his theory into practice, emphasizes that precedent has as one of the possible reasons to connect past and present, allowing changes to modern architecture to occur naturally, in addition to uniting antagonistic positions present in this context. and to defend the insertion of this architecture in the country.

### **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: The timelessness of Lucio Costa's creation process**

The adoption of both traditions, erudite and popular, lies in the fact that, for Costa, precedent seems to be fundamental material for theoretical and critical research, with the aim of serving as a subsidy for architectural creation, with the goal of achieving excellence, whatever the season of performance. That is, in this case, it seems that Costa's thinking about the role of precedent is related to his architectural ideals in terms of perennial values, in relation to the 'discipline of architecture', and focused solely on seeking to qualify it.

The opinion that Graeff expresses in the book "Lucio Costa: about architecture", in the introductory note, about Costa's role in the Brazilian architectural context, emphasizing the importance of studying both his writings and his architectural works, in which these documents are found- are your ideas and that they will remain perennial and your creation process is timeless and can be applied at any time. For that, the architect must have solid arguments in the choice of precedents to inspire his creation and the project to be developed must be connected to the socio-cultural and technological context of his era.

The present project, briefly analyzed here, of Parque Guinle, is just one example that its theory is inseparable from its design practice and that it was based on precedents both from the erudite tradition and from the Portuguese colonial popular tradition, since its other works, maintains this same reasoning in its creative process, such as: Vila Operária in Monlevade, Ministry of Education and Public Health (MESP), Plano Piloto de Brasília, among others. Thus, regardless of time, Costa's thought will remain perennial, recorded in his written work and in his projects and built architectural works, through a deep theoretical knowledge in which his rationally conceived arguments permeate between reason and emotion, dualities and opposite poles present at any time and, in particular, in Costa's view.

According to Maria Elisa Costa, in her statement in the book "O Risco: uma utopiamoderna", for Costa, time does not exist, it is only one: the fact that Costa valued the past, did not mean being nostalgic, it meant making links, connections, extracting knowledge to be able to evolve. For this reason, his analyzed theory and reflected in his design practice, as to his reasons for valuing tradition, giving precedent a fundamental role in his architectural conception, become extremely relevant due to Costa's uniqueness, specifically regarding this topic.

The international repertoire of architecture was thus adapted by him in Brazil to the historical and social conditions of a country that was beginning its process of industrialization. From this new vision, introduced through the work of Lucio Costa, an incentive was made possible for the new generations of Brazilian architects, in the sense of better understanding the country's reality and identifying the resulting professional and social responsibilities. And it is precisely this that sets Costa apart, based on his influence on a generation of architects, among whom many moved away from the study of precedent as a theoretical principle for practical foundations, associated with his various and important contributions in these aspects, that the This article emphasizes its timelessness in terms of its creation process.

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