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Tropical Opulence: Rio de Janeiro's Theater Competition of 1857

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In 1857, the Brazilian imperial government of Dom Pedro II opened a public competition for a *teatro lírico* in Rio de Janeiro. It was to be the first public architectural competition in Brazil, the result of an initiative by Manuel de Araújo Porto-Alegre and Guilherme Schuch de Capanema regarding the construction of a new official theater in Rio de Janeiro. In a petition to Dom Pedro II from August 12, 1851, they asked “His Imperial Majesty the favor to order a competition for the project of the new theater.”¹ The theater was to be built on the Campo de Santana, called the Praça da Acclamação since 1822, and today Praça da República. The program of the competition, established under the government of Pedro de Araújo Lima, marquês de Olinda, was published on November 13, 1857, in Rio de Janeiro’s *Jornal do Commercio*. The same journal published the jury’s verdict on the competition entries on March 23, 1859. The first prize was awarded to Gustav Waehneltdt (1830–73), a German architect established in Rio de Janeiro since 1852, known especially as the architect of Rio de Janeiro’s Palácio do Catete (1858–67) and for being involved in completing the Igreja da Candelária by designing the octagonal drum of the cupola as well as balustrades and sculptures of the drum’s façade (1863–68).² The second prize went to William John Green (1835–99) and Louis De Ville (d. 1906), British and French architects, respectively, who had established their firm in London. Samuel Sloan (1815–84) from Philadelphia ranked third.

Though this *teatro lírico* was never realized and the Campo de Santana was transformed into a park in the second half of the 1870s, the competition provides a very interesting example regarding to the relationship between the Brazilian imperial government’s expectations and exterior projections coming from international contributions explicitly requested by the competition program in addressing “concorrentes que residirem fóra

1 “... a Vossa Magestade Imperial a graça de mandar pôr a concurso o projeto do novo teatro” (Rio de Janeiro, Arquivo Nacional, IE 743). Quoted after Francisco Riopardense de Macedo, *Arquitetura no Brasil e Araújo Porto Alegre* (Porto Alegre: Editora da Universidade, UFRGS, 1984), 75. Cf. the quotation (with differences) in Donato Mello Junior, “O arquiteto Gustav Waehneltdt,” *Arquitetura Revista* 8 (1990): 54–62, here 55. Mello presented the findings of his article—the first on the competition of 1857 of some detail—initially at the *II Congresso de História da Arte of the Comitê Brasileiro de História da Arte* in 1984; see also the abstract of Mello’s talk before the Comissão de Estudos e Pesquisas Históricas in *Revista do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro* 151, suplemento (1990): 110–11. On Porto-Alegre see Roberto Conduru, “A história da arte no Brasil, ‘de cá para lá,’” *Perspective. La revue de l’INHA* 2 (2013): 263–68.

2 See Mello, “O arquiteto Gustav Waehneltdt.”

do império.”³ I will focus on a comparison of Waehneltdt’s winning project and the project placed second by Green and De Ville, and will, in addition, discuss the project by the German architect Gottfried Semper (1803–79).⁴ It is of particular interest as a project by a major European theater architect renowned for his Dresden Opera (1838–41). However, it was excluded from the competition because it did not fulfill the requirements of the first article of the program, which defined the size and placement of the theater.⁵ As shown in one of the commission’s preparatory drawings of the site plan, in the Biblioteca Nacional, the theater should have occupied a space on the southern part of the Campo de Santana, with the main façade facing north toward the huge open square.⁶ Semper’s solution corresponds to this requirement in placing the theater south of the plan’s line A (the Rua da Conde, today the sector between Rua Visconde de Rio Branco and Rua Frei Caneca) that delimits the square.⁷ Thus, his exclusion might be related to the required size.

However, I will argue that Semper offered a project whose *form* might have caused problems for the jury. Semper’s competition entry reveals a particular degree of European projection about what it is that makes Rio de Janeiro a Brazilian city and its life one in an imperial context.

3 Ministério do Império, “Programma de concurso para construção de um theatro na cidade do Rio de Janeiro,” *Jornal do Commercio* 32, no. 312 (November 13, 1857): 1. Extracts of the program have been published after a document in the Biblioteca Nacional in Rio de Janeiro (maybe corresponding to one of the program variants in II-35,03,005) in Rogério D. Penido, “Os teatros no Rio de Janeiro (sécs XVIII e XIX),” *Cadernos de teatro* 109 (April–June 1986): 10–18, here 15–16.

4 I have not succeeded so far in localizing Samuel Sloan’s plans for the Rio de Janeiro theater competition. It is not mentioned in Harold N. Cooledge, JR., *Samuel Sloan: Architect of Philadelphia, 1815–1884* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986).

5 Ministério do Império, “Termo de Julgamento,” *Jornal do Commercio* 34, no. 82 (March 23, 1859): 1, where Semper is listed among the rejected projects under the motto “Ver non semper floret”. For the identification of this motto with Semper’s project and the project itself see Heidrun Laudel, “Kaiserliches Theater in Rio de Janeiro,” in *Gottfried Semper 1803–1879: Architektur und Wissenschaft*, ed. Winfried Nerdinger and Werner Oechslin (Munich: Prestel/Zurich: gta, 2003), 333–36.

6 Rio de Janeiro, Biblioteca Nacional, II-35,03,005:8A (general plan of the Campo de Santana); II-35,03,005:9 (required position of theater); II-35,03,005:10 (variant of theater position).

7 See the first article of the program in Ministério do Império, “Programma de concurso”: “O theatro será construido em um terreno rectangular de 435 palmos de frente e 600 de fundos, situado entre deus quarteirões de casas com frentes de um lado para a praça da Acclamação (linha A da planta), e de outro lado para uma rua paralela áquella linha. A fachada deitará para a Praça, ficando pelas faces lateraes duas ruas, e pelos fundos o espaço que mediar entre o mesmo theatro e a outra rua.”

Theatrical Politics

The program for Rio de Janeiro's 1857 competition asked for a theater that could house everything from operas and ballets to public festivities.⁸ In this role of serving public festivities, it took over functions fulfilled traditionally by the Campo de Santana. I briefly recapitulate this context of the intended construction site before discussing the theater projects more closely. In 1857, when the theater competition was announced, the square was called Praça da Acclamação, referring to the event in 1822 when Dom Pedro I was publicly acclaimed as constitutional emperor of Brazil, thus ensuring Brazil's independence from Portugal. The acclamation of Dom Pedro took place in front of a small *palacete* situated in the center of the Campo de Santana.⁹ The Campo de Santana's historical importance thus must have had its impact on the decision to build a new theater on it. This becomes intriguing insofar as a theater differs in its paramount function from the *palacete* formerly occupying the square.

Between the two events—the acclamation of Dom Pedro in 1822 and the start of the theater competition in 1857—there existed other plans to urbanize the Campo de Santana. In 1827, the French architect Auguste Grandjean de Montigny (1776–1850), a member of the French Artistic Mission that came to Brazil in 1816, proposed to transform the Campo de Santana into a “Forum Imperial da acclamação.” Under this plan, the *palacete* would have been enlarged and moved to the triangular eastern edge of the place, its center occupied by an equestrian statue of Dom Pedro, the whole encircled by ministerial and functionaries' houses. The square was given a processional direction through a triumphal arch on its northern end.¹⁰ The next step in remodeling the Campo de Santana

8 Ministério do Imperio, “Programma de concurso”: “O theatro terá dimensões proprias para que se possam executar grandes espectaculos, como sejam operas lyricas, bailados, pantomimas e festas publicas.”

9 See Félix Émile Taunay's etching “Acclamação de S.M.O Snr. D. Pedro I ... no dia 12 de Outubro 1822” (Rio de Janeiro, Biblioteca Nacional, E:g:II), and the rendering of the scene with corresponding text in Jean-Baptiste Debret, *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil*, 3 vols. (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1834–39), vol. 3, 222–23 and pl. 47.

10 See Grandjean de Montigny's plan and “Nota explicativa do Projecto da Praça proposta no Campo de Santa Anna”, Rio de Janeiro, Museu Nacional de Belas Artes (inv. no. 6393), and the corresponding elevation in the Museu D. João VI (inv. no. 2978). For Grandjean de Montigny's urbanization project of the Campo de Santana see Adolfo Morales de los Rios Filho, *Grandjean de Montigny e a evolução da arte brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: Empresa a Noite, 1941, after 128 (figs. of “Elevação” and “Nota explicativa”), and 287–88 (transliteration of “Nota explicativa”); Robert Coustet, “Grandjean de Montigny, urbanista,” in *Uma*

was the construction of a Teatro Provisório in November 1851 on the southern part of the square, between Rua dos Ciganos (today Rua da Constituição) and Rua do Hospício (today Rua Buenos Aires). This theater provisionally replaced Rio de Janeiro's first theater, the Real Teatro de São João (later renamed the Teatro São Pedro de Alcântara), built in 1813 on the Praça da Constituição (today's Praça Tiradentes) and destroyed by fire for the second time in August 9, 1851.¹¹

In establishing the Teatro Provisório on the Campo de Santana, the Brazilian government offered an alternative space for imperial representations formerly fulfilled by the *palacete* on the occasion of Pedro I's acclamation in 1822 on the one hand, and by the Real Teatro de São João on the other. In 1821, the Portuguese king Dom João VI provisionally accepted the constitution of Lisbon on its balcony.¹² Dom João VI was confirming Brazil's adherence to Portugal, yet he was thus also preparing his departure from Brazil and, unwittingly, the soon-to-come acclamation of his son, Dom Pedro I, as constitutional emperor of an independent Brazil. The Teatro Provisório, in substituting the Real Teatro de São João, transferred the latter's political implications to the Campo de Santana. It did so visibly by copying the outer appearance of the first theater, as can be seen from a watercolor by José dos Reis Carvalho from 1853.¹³ The provisional theater continued to be in use on the Campo de Santana until 1875; it was destroyed in the course of the construction of the new park.¹⁴

Whatever the precise reasons for planning a new theater on the Campo de Santana, it meant a change to former modes of impe-

cidade em questão: Grandjean de Montigny e o Rio de Janeiro (Rio de Janeiro: PUC/FUNARTE/Fundação Roberto Marinho, 1979), 65–72 and 162–63, figs. 29 and 30; Donato Mello Jr., "Fontes documentais para pesquisas sobre o arquiteto Grandjean de Montigny", *ibid.*, 107–24; Donato Mello Jr., "Presença de Grandjean de Montigny no Brasil," *Revista do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro* 148, no. 357 (October/December 1990): 439–51, here 443.

11 Mello, "O arquiteto Gustav Waehneltdt," 55; José Dias, *Teatros do Rio do século XVIII ao século XX* (Rio de Janeiro: FUNARTE, 2012, 2nd ed. 2014), 68–100 and 109–112. Rosana Pereira de Freitas (Rio de Janeiro) has drawn my attention to the latter book.

12 For the Real Teatro de São João in 1821, see Debret, *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil*, vol. 3, 219–20 and pl. 45.

13 Reproduced in Dias, *Teatros do Rio*, 111. See also a photograph by Rafael Castro y Ordóñez from 1862 showing the provisional theater on the Campo de Santana (Rio de Janeiro, Biblioteca Nacional, FOTOS-ARM.3.9.2[21]).

14 Dias, *Teatros do Rio*, 112.

rial representation.¹⁵ This change is implicitly present in that the new theater would have replaced the Teatro Provisório, and that this latter became a sort of substitute for the Campo de Santana's *palacete*. The projects of the competition of 1857 I will now discuss display a will to create a theater in the form of a palace, thus combining in reality the architectural type of the *palacete* of the 1822 acclamation with the architectural embodiment of the unsuccessful provisional acceptance of the Lisbon constitution in 1821. Thus, with the theater competition, Dom Pedro II created the possibility of delivering his imperial presentations to his subjects in more favorable circumstances than the ones committed to history's memory by his grandfather on the balcony of the Real Teatro de São João. In any case, it seems remarkable to me that the theater competition of 1857 refers, by the choice of its site and the awarded projects, more or less directly to crucial political events of Brazil's history in a way that closely associates politics and theater.

A Theater for the People and for the Emperor

The main reason why the planned theater was never built was apparently a question of money and a changing government that recommended in 1858 that it stop spending funds to acquire houses at the construction site, as it did not seem urgent to build a new theater.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the competition continued to arouse local polemics regarding the jury's award of the first prize to Waehnelde, as well as international comments focused particularly on the projects by Green and De Ville and Gottfried Semper, both of which were exhibited on different occasions in Europe. The only images known to date of Waehnelde's winning project—two photographs by Marc Ferrez (1843–1923) of a plaster model—make its discussion rather difficult. While the captions of the photographs explain that the project's plan was by Waehnelde, they state that the “project of the façades and the execution of the plaster model” was “by the engineer-architect Luiz Schreiner.”¹⁷ As Luiz (Ludwig) Schreiner (1838–92), another German expatriate born in Berlin, seems to have come

15 For representational aspects of the Brazilian imperial government in the field of anthropology and museums, see Jens Andermann, *The Optic of the State: Visuality and Power in Argentina and Brazil* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007).

16 Mello, “O arquiteto Gustav Waehnelde,” 56.

17 Marc Ferrez, “Modelo de novo teatro lyrico em Rio de Janeiro,” Rio de Janeiro, Biblioteca Nacional, FOTOS-ARC.1.5(19-20): “Autor da planta premiada, o Architecto, G. Waehnelde. Projecto das fachadas e execução do modelo em gesso pelo engheneiro architecto, Luiz Schreiner. Coadjuvado pelo escultor, F. Beaugrand.”

to Rio de Janeiro only in or after 1876,¹⁸ his model might have been made just when de Campo de Santana was being transformed into a park.

Hints about the original look of Waehnelde's project can be gathered from the jury's verdict and from contemporary critiques. The jury stated quite laconically that his project "is much superior to all other competition entries." It not only "satisfies all of the program's exigencies," but "is remarkable for the singularity of ornaments, especially the exterior ones."¹⁹ This praise of the ornaments was one of the jury's justifications that aroused harsh reactions by an anonymous critic signing as "Um concorrente." In the first of a series of articles published in Rio de Janeiro's *Correio Mercantil*, he observed that the ornaments were "even too singular, for they do not exist," with an exterior "not covered by a superposition of pilasters."²⁰ Beyond the lack of a common neo-Renaissance ornament, the critic also rejected a cylindrical feature of the façade the jury itself criticized: "The committee would have appreciated more if it had not a cylindrical façade; yet this small drawback is neither contrary to the clauses of the program nor does it modify the unanimous verdict of the commission's members with respect to its merit in question."²¹ The cylindrical exterior appearance of Waehnelde's project also provoked further ridicule. The anonymous critique called the project "a veritable pigeon loft," and likened it to the *barrière* Saint-Denis in Paris,²² probably meaning in-

18 "Todtenschau. Ludwig Schreiner", *Deutsche Bauzeitung* 26, no. 83 (October 15, 1892): 511–12; Sacramento Blake, *Diccionario Bibliographico Brasileiro*, vol. 5 (Rio de Janeiro: Imprensa Nacional, 1899), 464.

19 Ministerio do Imperio, "Termo de Julgamento": "Este plano satisfaz a todas as exigencias do programma; offerece todas as condições desejaveis de segurança e commodidade; faz-se notavel pela singelosa dos ornamentos, maxime os exteriores. [...] Segundo este juizo, o plano [...] é muito superior a todos os outros que entrãrão em concurso, e deve ser o preferido para a construcção."

20 Um concorrente, "Concurso para o theatro lyrico," *Correio Mercantil* 16, no. 85 (March 26/27, 1859): 1: "Com effeito, Srs. commissão, valha-nos a verdade são muito singelos os ornamentos, singelos demais até, pois que não existem! Não passa o exterior de uma superposição de pilastras".

21 Ministerio do Imperio, "Termo de Julgamento": "A commissão o estimaria mais se não tivesse a fachada cylindrica; mas este pequeno senão em nada contraria as clausulas do programma, nem modifica o juizo unanime dos membros da commissão, quanto ao merito relativo."

22 Um concorrente, "Concurso para o theatro lyrico": "O pequeno *senão* da commissão tem apenas por effeito tornar o plano ... um verdadeiro pombal: e se os Srs. commissarios forem a Paris recommendamos-lhes que vão ver perto da barreira de S. Diniz um corpo de guarda,

stead the *barrière* Saint-Martin by Jean-Nicolas Ledoux with its *rotonde de la Villette*.

While it might be that Waehneltd's project was influenced by Grandjean de Montigny, whose designs adopted features of French revolutionary architecture, the jury seems to have been opposed to such associations. Indeed, if Ludwig Schreiner's reinterpretation of Waehneltd's design reproduces the latter's volumes, the cylindrical feature of its exterior appearance with the semicircular façade of the auditorium is rather restrained, given its placement on the upper stories in front of the fly tower, amply distant from the main rectangular façade that opens toward the square. Even if the alleged lack of ornament in Waehneltd's façade design might have recalled features of some of Grandjean de Montigny's designs, it would have distinguished itself from one of the latter's theater projects. This project presents a plan in which the semicircular auditorium forms the main façade from bottom to top.²³ It is, in fact, a solution adapted from a theater design by Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand.²⁴ Durand's plan was also a reference for Semper's Dresden Opera,²⁵ which, in its turn, provided the starting point for his own Rio de Janeiro competition entry.

Under the assumption that Schreiner's plaster model reflects Waehneltd's project, the latter's outer rectangular appearance was that of a palace, with the exception of the cylindrical auditorium. It was joined in its palace-like appearance by Green and De Ville's second prize, which presented a sort of oblong box without any curves on the principal façade. Only the rear side of the theater bulges out slightly due to the concert hall placed there. But the main auditorium is embedded in a sort of classicizing neo-Renaissance block.²⁶ Maybe it was this particular blocky feature for which Green and De Ville were awarded.

cuja rotundidade nos parece ter servido de modelo ao autor desse exímio specimen!"

23 Grandjean de Montigny, *Planta baixa, corte e fachada de teatro* (Rio de Janeiro, Museu D. João VI).

24 Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand, *Précis des leçons d'architecture données à l'École polytechnique*, vol. 2 (Paris: Bernard, 1805), pl. 16.

25 Heidrun Laudel, "Erstes Hoftheater Dresden," in *Gottfried Semper 1803–1879: Architektur und Wissenschaft*, 168–78, here 171.

26 See the engravings of Green and De Ville's project in "Design for Theater in Rio de Janeiro," *The Builder* 17, no. 871 (October 15, 1859): 680–81; "Concert-Room in Design for Theatre, Rio de Janeiro," *The Builder* 17, no. 872 (October 22, 1859): 695–96.



MODELO DO NOVO THEATRO LYRICO EM RIO DE JANEIRO

Autor da Planta premiada, o Architecto G. WAHNELDT.
 PROJECTO DAS FACHADAS E EXECUÇÃO DO MODELO EM GESSO PELO ENGENHEIRO ARCHITECTO, LUIZ SCHREINER.
 Coadjuvado pelo escultor F. BRAUGRAND.

1. Gustav Waehneltdt, Project for a new theater in Rio de Janeiro, plaster model by Luiz Schreiner, c. 1876. Rio de Janeiro, Biblioteca Nacional, FOTOS-ARC.

In contrast, Semper's project offers a main façade that is essentially a cylindrical one embracing all of its walls. Compared to Waehneltdt's presumptive project, one also sees the difference that probably wouldn't have favored Semper: Waehneltdt allowed the cylindrical parts of the façade only a shy presence above and behind a neo-Renaissance entrance featuring a temple pediment; Semper's proposition was exactly the opposite. Seen from the square, his own temple pediment covering the fly tower is hidden partially from view by the protruding cylindrical façade of the auditorium, with the main entrance in its center.

For Semper, the cylindrical façade was the quintessential architectural expression of a public assembling in circles around any event, be it in the street or, for that matter, in the theater. Thus, the preeminent feature of Semper's idea of a theater was the common public.²⁷ The state power or, as was the case in Dresden as well as in Rio de Janeiro, the constitutional monarch, were secondary in this respect – at least for the exterior architectural expression of his Dresden Opera that signaled, through the outward cylindrical feature, a certain democratic element. In his project for Rio de Janeiro, Semper repeated the

27 Michael Gnehm, "Im Konflikt zwischen Individuum und Gesellschaft: Gottfried Semper's theatraler Urbanismus," in *Metropolen 1850–1950: Mythen – Bilder – Entwürfe*, ed. Jean-Louis Cohen and Hartmut Frank (Berlin/Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2013), 61–86, here 70–71.

architectural importance of the semicircle, stating that “he did not want to hide the semi-cylindrical form of the auditorium” by “putting this characteristic form of a theater into a square cage as it happens with most modern theaters.”²⁸ However, Semper now transformed this element of a democratic theatricality into something more imperial. He added an exterior loge for the emperor in the apex of the cylindrical façade—a miniature adaptation of the staircases of Bramante’s Belvedere in the Vatican, including the *nicchione*, the niche on the upper end of the oblong square.²⁹

The projects by Waehneltdt and Green and De Ville also offered opportunities for the emperor to present himself to his subjects assembling in the square. Both marked the theater entrance through loggias covered by temple pediments, emphasizing the imperial importance of this feature through their massiveness. Although Semper’s exterior imperial loge is also crowned by a pediment, it appears rather as a whimsical ornament compared to Waehneltdt’s and Green and De Ville’s imposing pediments. In spite of this, Semper alluded explicitly to an imperial context with his exterior loge, as he explained in his notes accompanying the project. He called his design “a theater for double usage,” meaning, on the one hand, a theater that served for “scenic representations” in its interior, and on the other hand, a theater wherefrom festivities on the square could be watched.³⁰ Semper compared the Campo de Santana to an “arena” with the exterior loge corresponding to the imperial balcony of an antique Roman amphitheater. The emperor’s exterior loge thus functioned as a hinge between the halves—the interior and exterior parts—of Semper’s imaginary amphitheater for Rio de Janeiro. Furthermore, Semper saw his “theater for double usage” expressly as the place where the “spectacles for celebrating all happy or memorable events of the nation” would take place.³¹ In this sense, his project would have reassembled

28 Gottfried Semper, “Notes explicatives au projet de Théâtre pour la ville de Rio de Janeiro, avec l’Épigraphe: Ver non semper floret,” MS (1858), 3 (gta Archiv/ETH Zurich, 20-153-DOK-10): “Surtout il n’a pas voulu cacher la forme demicylindrique de la salle de spectacle [...]. Il n’a pas emboîtée dans une cage carrée cette forme éminemment caractéristique pour un théâtre, comme cela a lieu chez la plupart des Salles de spectacle modernes.”

29 Josef Bayer, *Das neue k. k. Hofburgtheater als Bauwerk mit seinem Sculpturen- und Bilderschmuck* (Wien: Gesellschaft für vervielfältigende Kunst, 1894), 18–19.

30 Semper, “Notes explicatives,” 1–2.

31 Ibid.: “C’est sur l’arène formée par cette place que devront s’exécuter les processions,

the moments of Brazil's history mentioned above, embracing political and theatrical moments simultaneously.

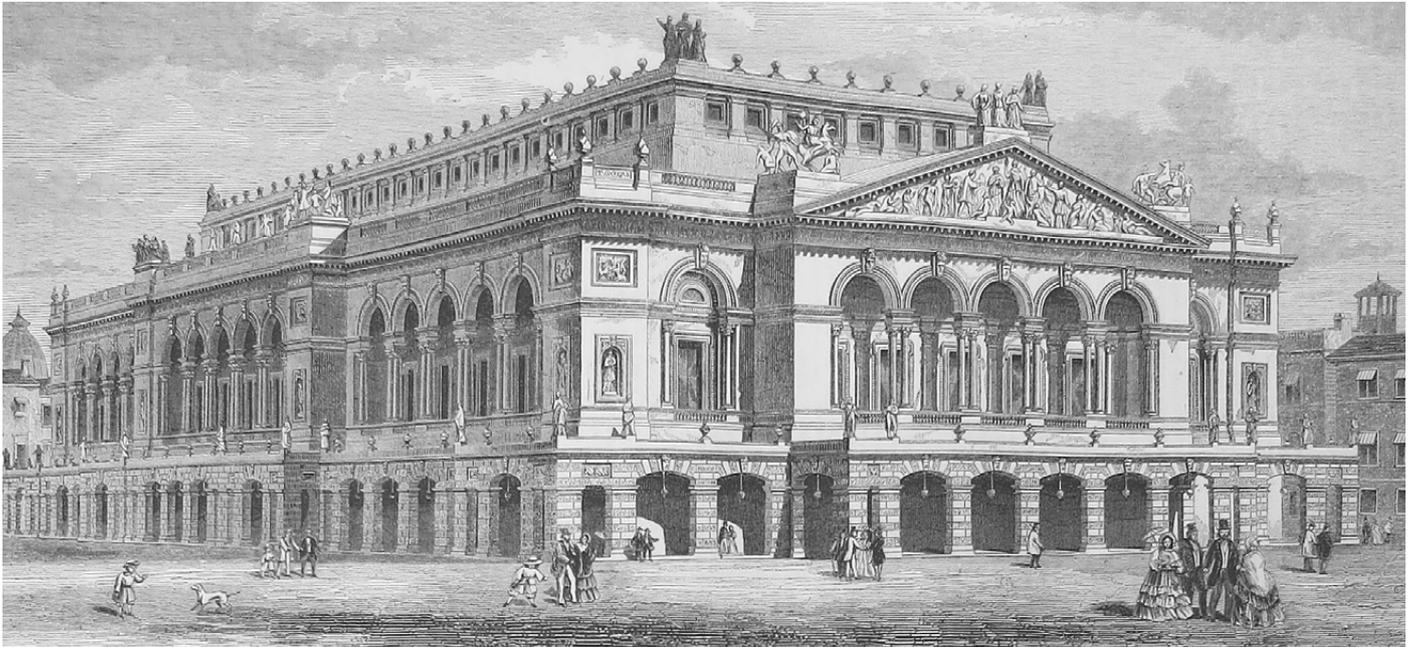
Bastards and Hybrids

Despite their obvious differences, all three of these projects share a certain degree of strangeness. All of them are vested with neo-Renaissance features, but all contain elements opposed to any pure Renaissance adaptation. This strangeness was actually commented on by contemporary reviews, starting with the anonymous critic in the *Correio Mercantil*. He insinuated that Waehneltdt acted only as a dummy, denouncing that “the father of that plan” was “a German head, yet grafted in fact onto a Brazilian trunk.”³² This attack, which united allegations of nepotism and xenophobic resentments, touches upon a major problem of the competition with respect to its international intentions. In reality, the issue of grafting resulting in hybrids is present in Waehneltdt's project itself, at least in its refurbishment by Schreiner. The strange idea of introducing a stepped gable as a closure to the stepped sequence from the temple pediment to the cylindrical auditorium façade surely represents such a hybrid. I consider this to be an homage to Waehneltdt's (and Schreiner's) home country, Germany. In any case, the stepped gable introduces a sign that announces the mainly neo-Renaissance opera to be built in a spirit of the so-called German Renaissance. If the Latinizing main façades can be considered as some sort of Brazilian architectural element, then the project indeed presents, as the critic in the *Correio Mercantil* called Waehneltdt himself, “a German head, yet grafted in fact onto a Brazilian trunk.”

Architectural grafting and the ensuing hybridity is a topic also present in the projects by Green and De Ville and by Semper. European responses to these two projects testify to this feature

les fêtes populaires, les feux d'artifice et autres spectacles pour célébrer tout événement heureux ou mémorable du pays. C'est ici que sans doute se feront les revues et les grandes parades militaires. En partant de cette supposition l'auteur du projet a conçu l'idée d'un théâtre à double usage; c'est à dire qui servirait intérieurement, pour les représentations scéniques et pour les fêtes qui auront lieu dans son enceinte, extérieurement, comme le Maenianum impérial qui dominera l'arène étendue devant lui, à l'instar d'une disposition tout à fait semblable, qui, sous l'Empire Romain, du versant du mont Palatin dominait le grand Cirque de la capitale de l'ancien monde.”

32 Um concorrente, “Concurso para o theatro lyrico”: “surgisse uma cabeça alemã, na verdade, porém, enxertada sobre um tronco brasileiro.”



2. William John Green and Louis De Ville, Project for a new theater in Rio de Janeiro, in *The Builder* 17 (1859). Zurich, ETH-Bibliothek.

so typical of an eclectic and historicist architecture that dominated the nineteenth century. When Green and De Ville's project was shown in a London exhibition in 1860, it was reviewed as "a handsome but not strikingly original building in the Palladian style."³³ One may think of Andrea Palladio's Palazzo della Ragione in Vicenza. Another critic was more severe on the occasion of Green and De Ville's presentation of their project at the International Exhibition in London in 1862, judging their "opera-house for Rio Janeiro [to be] designed in a very corrupt and bastard style."³⁴ Perhaps the critique addressed the theater's strange crest with its rows of stylized palmettes, which recall Michelangelo's Porta Pia in Rome with its castellation ending in ionic volutes crowned by spheres—a building associated with Mannerism in later times. Green and De Ville may have adopted this crowning ornamental strangeness precisely to express strangeness or exoticism. Despite its hybrid ornamental richness, which combines medieval and exotic features with classical ones (the roof parapet mixing castellation and palmettes), another critic praised the project, though "not elegant," for "the deep recessed arcades" that "employ those elements constructionally," while "modern classicists" made use of them only ornamentally.³⁵

33 "The Architectural Exhibition," *The Civil Engineer and Architect's Journal* 23, no. 315 (June 1, 1860): 161–64, here 162.

34 "British Architecture in the International Exhibition," *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science, and Art* 14, no. 365 (October 25, 1862): 509–10, here 509.

35 "International Exhibition. English Architectural Design," *The Athenaeum* 1811 (July 12, 1862): 50–52, here 51.

Gottfried Semper's theater project presents major reflections on exactly this issue regarding the relation of ornament and construction. He did so by mixing medieval and Renaissance elements in a constitutive way, rather than only superficially, as in the ornamental treatment seen in the projects by Waehnelde and Green and De Ville. He prolonged the exterior pilaster strips of the auditorium as freestanding pillars that surmount the entablature and connect to flying buttresses serving as supports for the auditorium's iron roof structure. This remarkable form of hybridity had already led to assumptions on its relationship to the Brazilian context by the end of the nineteenth century, namely that the "exceptional and even strange forms" of Semper's theater had "doubtlessly" been provoked by the "foreign and exotic setting."³⁶ This evaluation had been spurred by reviews of Semper's project shown at an architectural exhibition taking place in Munich in 1863. One critic felt himself "transposed virtually to the opulent soil of South America ... at first sight through the unusual richness of the vitally arranged and peculiarly designed building volumes."³⁷ This imaginary projection even entered an academic handbook of architectural history in 1865, where Semper's theater for Rio de Janeiro was characterized as having an "architecture [...] breathing tropical opulence."³⁸

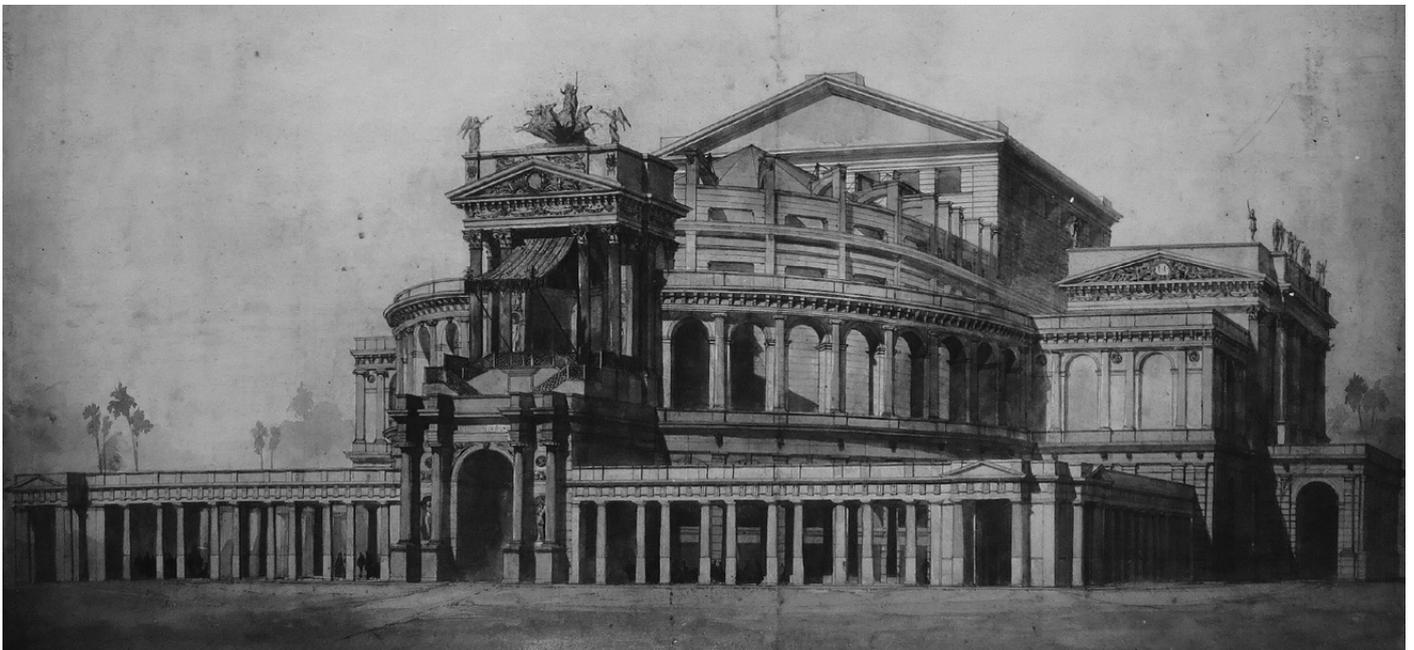
Actually, Semper's presentation drawings of his theater project reveal only minor "tropical opulence" at first sight, indicated via some palm trees flanking the building. Yet he was very anxious to contribute a theater design that took into account the characteristics of the location, that is, of Rio de Janeiro. He therein followed the instructions of the competition program that asked explicitly for constructions to be "adapted to the climate of Rio de Janeiro."³⁹ This was unmistakably a call for a site-specific design. Semper tried to fulfill this requirement insofar as he introduced the emperor's exterior loge on the one hand, and on the other hand wrapped rectangular colonnades (he called them "a double portico") around his cylindrical façade. In doing

36 Bayer, *Das neue k. k. Hofburgtheater als Bauwerk*, 18.

37 "Zwei Architektur-Ausstellungen," *Recensionen und Mittheilungen über bildende Kunst* 3, no. 40 (October 1, 1864): 314–316, here 314.

38 Wilhelm Lübke, *Geschichte der Architektur von den ältesten Zeiten bis zur Gegenwart*, 3rd, enlarged ed. (Leipzig: Seemann, 1865), 749.

39 Ministerio do Imperio, "Programma de concurso": "Será construido segundo o systema moderno, e adaptado ao clima do Rio de Janeiro".



3. Gottfried Semper, Project for a new theater in Rio de Janeiro, 1858. Munich, Deutsches Theatermuseum (Photo: Archiv/ETH Zurich).

so, he attempted to avoid the danger that his theater for Rio de Janeiro would be viewed as being a copy of his Dresden Opera. Indeed, the competition program included as a major criterion that the proposed theaters must not be “servile imitations” of existing theaters.⁴⁰ Thus, Semper wrote in his explanatory notes to the jury that the “exterior double portico was almost necessary for a climate like the one in Brazil.”⁴¹ He even introduced fountains under the colonnades apparently in order to respond to climate requirements.

Semper’s attempt at introducing site specificity also reveals itself in his conspicuous stressing of the difference between the Renaissance-like colonnades and the theatrical superstructure that ends in the gothicizing flying buttresses. Thus, his theater design points explicitly to some technical feature—that is, to a constructive element, the buttresses—that presents itself as distinct from the ornamental aspects of the Renaissance façade. This idea of representing a constructive element in all its visible functionality is extremely rare in Semper’s own projects; it forms a main argument in his critique of Gothic architecture. In his major theoretical work, *Style in the Technical*

40 Ibid.: “não sendo admittidas cópias ou imitações servis de outros theatros”. On Semper’s fear to be judged for plagiarism of his own work, see Dieter Weidmann, *Gottfried Semper «Polytechnikum» in Zürich. Ein Heiligtum der Wissenschaften und Künste*, 2 vols., Ph.D. dissertation ETH Zurich, MS (Zurich 2010), vol. 1, 361.

41 Semper, “Notes explicatives,” 5: “Le double portique extérieur, sous un climat comme celui du Brésil sera presque nécessaire, tout comme promenoir pendant les entreactes des représentations et scéniques; que pendant la journée pour le public et surtout pour ceux qui attendront l’ouverture des caisses.”

and Tectonic Arts (1860/63), he declares that Gothic architecture “wants to know nothing of dressing because its element is the naked apparition of its functional parts, as it has to display its skeleton in action like the armored crab.”⁴² This association of an architectural style with a “primitive” animal—the crab—renders the architecture in question into a “primitive” one. As a matter of fact, Gothic architecture presented for Semper a sort of primitive hut, observed in the way he described the model of a Caribbean hut he saw in London at the Great Exhibition of 1851.⁴³ In introducing a functional element in its “naked apparition” in his theater design for Rio de Janeiro, he thus evokes the idea of an “exotic” architectural primitivism like it was transmitted, for example, through Jean-Baptiste Debret’s *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil* with a plate showing, as the caption says, “Different forms of huts of Brazilian savages.”⁴⁴ In this sense, Semper’s visible flying buttresses serve as a marker that indicates the presence of “savage” elements. An attentive reviewer of Semper’s design for Rio de Janeiro seems to have felt as much when he criticized that “the naked needs emerge too sharply in the superstructure.”⁴⁵

Semper’s solution of an architectural hybridity for Rio de Janeiro, however, does not stop here. He characterizes the colonnades on the ground floor in front of the auditorium as “a transparent curtain” from which the building would detach itself as being more “grandiose.”⁴⁶ The more hidden function of this “transparent curtain,” however, is provided through its relationship to Semper’s “principle of dressing”; that is, the idea that architecture is determined rather by its envelope than by

42 Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten, oder Praktische Aesthetik*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt a.M.: Verlag für Kunst und Wissenschaft, 1860/Munich: Bruckmann, 1863), vol. 1, 320. See Michael Gnehm, “The Secondary Origin: Semper and Viollet-le-Duc and the Quest for a Cultural History of Architecture,” *eaV, revue de l'école d'architecture de Versailles* 12 (2006/07): 62–71, here 69.

43 Semper, *Der Stil*, vol. 2, 276.

44 Debret, *Voyage pittoresque et historique au Brésil*, vol. 1, pl. 26.

45 Julius Meyer, “Die münchener Kunstausstellung und die Gegensätze in der modernen Kunst,” *Die Grenzboten* 22, vol. 4 (1863): 340–349, here 348.

46 Semper, “Notes explicatives,” 6: “Mais ce qu’il s’agit surtout de faire ressortir par rapport à ces portiques c’est qu’ils seront non seulement utiles, mais qu’ils serviront d’échelle et de cadre pour mieux faire valoir les proportions de l’édifice qu’ils entourent. Celui-ci loin d’être caché derrière le rideau transparent de cette colonnade aréostyle, paraîtra plus distinctement par l’effet du contraste. Car il dépassera considérablement son entourage transparent [...] et se montrera plus grandiose.”

its material core.⁴⁷ The ground floor curtain of his Rio de Janeiro theater is, in fact, the first of a series of curtains to follow successively with the terraced and arcaded exterior wall of the auditorium. This succession of curtains is, in turn, a marker of the intention to show how a cultivated architecture has to wrap “primitive” residues still in place in a world perceived globally.

Thus, Semper's proposal perfectly responded to colonialist and imperialist expectations of the time. It would be extraordinary if the jury and the Brazilian government had excluded Semper's project from the competition on such grounds. However, they seem to have preferred the projects by Waehnelde and Green and De Ville to Semper's theoretically legitimized formal excesses for much more vague reasons. Their theater designs offer a somewhat simple sort of hybrid architecture that seems to correspond to quite general expectations of eclectic architecture in a way that was amply present in Rio de Janeiro's architecture in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.⁴⁸

47 Michael Gnehm, “Bekleidungstheorie,” *Arch+*, 48, no. 221 (December 2015): 33–39.

48 In 1905, Francisco de Oliveira Passos even chose the motto “Semper” for his project for the competition of a palace for the Congresso Nacional in Rio de Janeiro; Giovanna Rosso Del Brenna, “Ecletismo no Rio de Janeiro (séc. XIX–XX),” in *Ecletismo na Arquitetura Brasileira*, organização Annateresa Fabris (São Paulo: Nobel/Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 1987): 28–67, here 58–59.

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Tropical Opulence:
Rio de Janeiro's
Theater Competition
of 1857

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New Worlds:
Frontiers,
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