

Diamantina (Brazil)

No 890

Identification

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| <i>Nomination</i> | Historic centre of the town of Diamantina |
| <i>Location</i> | State of Minas Gerais |
| <i>State Party</i> | Brazil |
| <i>Date</i> | 18 September 1998 |

Justification by State Party

Diamantina is one of the six Brazilian towns which were listed as historic monuments in 1938. In addition, Diamantina is the capital of one of the three main diamond-producing regions, the others being India until the 18th century and South Africa since the 19th century.

Since the production of diamonds coincided with the 18th century and early 19th century, the town has conserved an architectural and urban ensemble that is all the more remarkable in that the decline of mining activities saved it from the urban renovations of the 19th century. When "modernity" arrived in Diamantina, it was due to the political success of a son of the region, Juscelino Kubitschek, Governor of Minas Gerais (1950-55) and President of the Republic (1956-60). He had the wisdom to call upon the talents of Oscar Niemeyer, who designed four outstanding buildings.

Diamantina blends so perfectly with its site that it is one with the Serra dos Cristais. The historic centre nominated for inscription on the World Heritage List forms, with the Serra dos Cristais, a veritable cultural landscape which is complemented in the immediate vicinity by the Gruta do Salitre (the Saltpetre Grotto), an attractive geological curiosity, and Biri Biri, a tiny workers' housing estate (1873-90), a utopia set in a landscape of severe beauty.

Diamantina illustrates how the explorers of Brazil, adventurers in search of diamonds, and representatives of the Crown were able to adapt European models to an American context in the 18th century, thus creating a culture that was faithful to its roots yet completely original. **Criterion ii**

The urban and architectural group of Diamantina, which blends so perfectly with the wild landscape, is a fine example of an adventurous spirit combined with a quest for refinement, a significant characteristic of the history of mankind. **Criterion iv**

Diamantina is one of the last examples of the way in which Brazil tamed its territory and elaborated its culture. It is particularly exceptional in that it is linked to a mode of mining as rare as its object, that of diamonds. **Criterion v**

Category of Property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, the historic centre of Diamantina is a *group of buildings*. Taking into account the environment in which it is set, it can also be considered as a *living cultural landscape*.

History and Description

History

The town of Diamantina is like an oasis lying in the heart of the arid and rocky mountains of East-Central Brazil. It is in the State of Minas Gerais, 350km from Belo Horizonte and 710km from Brasilia, on the slope of a hill, spread over a difference of height of 150m. It developed in the 18th century in the southern Espinhaço Chain, at an altitude of 1200m, surrounded by the Serra dos Cristais in the valley of the Jequitinhonha river. The land of the Diamantina region is composed almost exclusively of quartzite rocks and schist, which give this region its mountainous and colourful aspect, but it also has a poor, permeable soil with a rupestrine vegetation. Its geological formations have shaped both the beauty of its landscape and its economic development.

One of the expeditions undertaken from São Paulo in 1713 to explore the interior of the Brazilian territory led to the establishment of one of the settlements of the *Arraial do Tijuco*, which was later to become Diamantina. Large quantities of diamonds were found on the mountain slopes and along the rivers of the region. As the best deposits were concentrated in the valley of the Tijuco stream, a small tributary of the Rio Grande, its banks were chosen as the site for a small hamlet called Burgalhau. However, unlike what happened in other Portuguese-speaking towns on the continent, such as Ouro Preto, the growth and consolidation of the *Arraial* led to the discovery in 1720 of an unsuspected source of wealth, diamonds. In this respect, the history of Diamantina is different from that of other mining towns in Brazil.

When the Portuguese Crown discovered the existence of this source of wealth in 1731, it set up a new body to administer the region, the *Demarcação Diamantina*, which encompassed the former *Arraial do Tijuco* and other mining hamlets in the neighbourhood. In 1734, it created the Diamond Intendancy which moved to Tijuco, already the biggest settlement in the region. The Intendancy was responsible for controlling the extraction and sale of diamonds. Initially, there was the so-called "period of the contracts," established in 1739, when mining rights were granted to private monopolies. In 1771, the Crown took back the ownership of this resource and entrusted the management of its mining to the *Real Extração do Diamante* which continued to operate until 1845. The royal monopoly was then

handled by the *Regimento Diamantino* which, it was claimed, was manned by more administrators than soldiers.

As it was governed by the State, Tijuco did not become a *vila*, that is to say, an entity bigger than a hamlet but smaller than a town, until 1832, ten years after the creation of Brazil. It then had the right to have its own local government. It was only in 1838, in recognition of its importance at regional level, that Tijuco was elevated to the rank of town. In 1845, the *Real Extração* was dissolved, and the mining leases signed under the supervision of the *Inspetoria dos Terrenos Diamantinos* were cancelled in 1906 with the dissolution of the *Inspetoria* itself. In the meantime, the first mechanical mining companies, diamond-cutting workshops, and silversmiths and goldsmiths were set up in the region. Unfortunately, the discovery of richer and better-quality deposits in South Africa caused the dramatic collapse of mining activities in Diamantina.

At the end of the 19th century, the utopian project of a textile industry in Diamantina led to the creation of Biri Biri, an idyllic industrial establishment built in close harmony with the very scenic landscape, about 12km from the town. Created out of nothing to make this dream come true, like the spontaneous villages set up by diamond hunters near the mining sites, the Biri Biri complex played an important role in the local economy, at least for a while. The industry did not survive but the village site has lost nothing of its atmosphere or charm. In 1914, the railway ran up to Diamantina, thus confirming its role as an economic centre and crossroads of the region. The railway closed down in 1973.

As the town suffered from so few disruptions since the decline of mining in the 19th century, its old fabric has been well protected and has survived almost intact.

Description

Two sets of 18th century plans show a layout of winding and uneven streets which have changed little since that time. The morphology of the town, inspired by the model of a Portuguese medieval town, has developed while respecting the continuity of the first settlement. The 18th century built-up area has become denser without losing its original character. The layout of roads, lanes, alleys, and public squares is the result of a natural occupation of the site, given the demanding topography, and it reflects the traffic which grew between the mining hamlets over the years. The centre of the old town has a greater density, and it is situated on ground that is slightly flatter than the outskirts. The neo-Baroque cathedral, built in the main square in 1938 and of a controversial size, stands out as a landmark in the peaceful panorama of the town.

The architecture of Diamantina is of Baroque inspiration, sober and pure like most other mining villages in Brazil. However, it has a number of specific features which distinguish it from the traditional Portuguese colonial model. Its geometry and certain details confirm that the people who were entrusted by the Portuguese Crown to rule over the destinies of this colony within the Colony were cultivated, and that they sought to transpose on a

modest scale some of the features of the architecture of their home country to their adopted land, as was equally the case for music and the arts.

The streets of the town are paved with large, flat, grey flagstones laid in such a way as to form a type of paving known as *capistranas*, named after President João Capistrano Bandeira de Melo, who introduced it in 1877. This picturesque paving creates a contrast between the road and the *casario*, a regular alignment of 18th and 19th century semi-detached houses, with one or two floors. Their facades, in bright colours on a white ground, are borrowed systematically from the same typology, and they display certain affiliations with the Portuguese Mannerist architecture. The plan is narrow and deep, the living rooms are placed in the front, followed by the bedrooms and then the outbuildings connected by a central, or more often, side corridor. The outer walls are made of a frame of interwoven wood, filled with cob or adobe of earth beaten and worked by hand, to which is added other materials such as stone or gravel. The architecture of Diamantina differs from that of other Brazilian colonial towns because cut stone is not used except for the foundations. Wood is used for the decorative elements in both civil and religious architecture.

Most of the churches and religious buildings in Diamantina have been incorporated, here and there, inside the regular and homogeneous complex of the *casario*, usually standing back only slightly from the alignment. This reveals that the spiritual power was closely related with the population, which distinguished it from, and no doubt subjugated it to, temporal power, given the very few church squares and areas set aside for social intercourse and public events.

The construction of the churches is similar to that of civil buildings, and they also have the same colours and textures. A distinct feature of most of the churches in Diamantina is that they have only one bell tower, usually erected on the side of the building. The pediment is in sculpted wood. Some of them are richly decorated with remarkable works by well known artists, in particular, the master of perspective painting, José Soares de Araujo.

The town has a few architectural curiosities of interest, especially the Old Market Hall constructed in 1835 and recently restored, the *Passadiço*, a covered footbridge in blue and white wood spanning the Rua da Glória to join the two buildings of the Eschwege Geology Centre, the *muxarabi* of the Antônio Torres Library, a kind of balcony completely enclosed by a wooden lattice, and finally the *chafariz* of the Rua Direita, near the Cathedral, a sculpted fountain which guarantees that whoever drinks from it will return to Diamantina.

Over and above the physical heritage, legends and traditions abound in this town. Rumours about the liaison between the black slave, Chica da Silva, and the Portuguese purchaser of diamonds, João Fernandes de Oliveira, are still very much alive. The scent of his mistress still pervades the huge rooms of the magnificent house he built for her around 1770. When night falls, the streets resound with the sad song of the *serestas*, sometimes the orchestral music of the *vesperatas*, or even the boisterous rhythms of

group of young percussion players and dancers who freely roam through the town at all hours.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The site nominated for inscription on the World Heritage List is part of the protected area designated as a national historic monument by Action No 64-T-38, inscription No 66 in the Book of Fine Arts, as adopted on 16 May 1938 by the Brazilian government, in conformity with Statutory Order No 25 of 30 November 1937. As its perimeter is much smaller than that of the historic site that was created by this legislation, the part of the protected area which is not included in the nominated site is considered as a buffer zone.

Management

Since 1938, the land has been under the authority of the National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage which, in conformity with the legislation governing it, is responsible for protecting the integrity and authenticity of listed cultural property and national historic monuments. In the context of a historic group, its jurisdiction also extends to buildings and structures situated in the vicinity of this group in order to safeguard its clarity and coherence.

The activities of the National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage in Diamantina are coordinated by its Regional Coordination Office for Minas Gerais, with the fieldwork being carried out by a Technical Office housed in the Casa Chica da Silva. The task of the Institute is to ensure that the work undertaken on buildings and structures inside the protected area complies with the principles and rules established for this purpose. The documentation, analysis, and follow-up of all restoration operations fall under its responsibility. The Institute itself carries out or coordinates work on the major monuments of the town.

In accordance with Article 182 of the Federal Constitution of 1988, the town council of Diamantina must prepare a master plan. This plan is in the process of being drawn up and should be adopted by mid-1999. In particular, the Plan proposes the adoption of measures to control the height of buildings and the areas for extension of the town in order to protect its form and urban integrity. It recommends the adoption of legislation and administrative measures to guarantee the participative and dynamic management of the conservation process and the development of the town, including its historic centre.

Within the framework of the implementation of this Plan, the National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage has drawn up a list of all the structures of a historical character in the region of Diamantina, including an inventory of available documents and a survey on the socio-economic profile of its inhabitants. This work was undertaken in compliance with the rules and procedures established to draw up a National Inventory of Property. The data collected are in the process of being computerized.

The Institute views the historic town as a living, dynamic, and constantly changing organism, whose survival is linked to its development, that is to say, to the active expansion of social and economic activities and to the conservation of the values which make it precious.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

The historic centre of the town has been under the authority of the National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage since its classification in 1938. The Institute rigorously monitors and follows up all the works carried out within the perimeter of the classified area or which could have an effect on the preservation of its integrity. The Technical Service of Diamantina is responsible for supervising projects in the field, but these must all be approved by regional coordination experts whose offices are located in Belo Horizonte.

Authenticity

The decline in mining exploration activities in the 19th century protected the town from the frequently disastrous upheavals inflicted in recent times on a large number of towns. The layout of the streets and the arrangement of elements of the built-up area have basically remained the same as shown in 18th century plans.

The old built-up area became denser during the 19th century but followed local traditional rules on the art of building. Until the 1950s, the buildings of the town were maintained by using the original materials and techniques. Nowadays, hollow bricks sometimes replace the cob or adobe in major reinforcement or reconstruction projects. When it comes to details, finishing touches, and colours, however, the architecture of Diamantina, whether it is civil, institutional, or religious, has not lost any of its character or originality.

Obviously, the modern town emerges as the visitor moves further away from the historic centre. Recent constructions of a high standard, such as those by Niemeyer, have been introduced into the townscape and usually blend harmoniously with it.

Age-old traditions, such as the *serestas* and the *vesperatas*, are still very much alive. An interesting aspect is that the quest for fortune and happiness, which used to motivate people in Diamantina to hunt for gold and diamonds, is still in vogue even though its intensity cannot be compared to what it was like in the past. It is sufficient to go outside the town, barely a few kilometres away, to see the work of the diamond hunters.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Diamantina in February 1999. ICOMOS also consulted its International Scientific Committee on Historic Towns and Villages.

Qualities

Diamantina is an authentic and concrete example of the incredible efforts made by humankind to seek its fortune, improve its condition, and fulfil itself. From the top of the mountains nearby, the region looks arid and barren as far as the eye can see. The landscape is lunar, a natural habitat for snakes and coyotes. Then in the distance a town appears, like an oasis lying in the heart of a tangle of rocky hills and unfertile valleys, an indissociable feature of its setting.

Crazy adventurers, hunters of dreams, built this town to fulfil their ambitions and hopes. Thanks to their strong determination, they built it to last both physically and spiritually. The town is attractive, with a simple but refined beauty. Traces of the past, which enriched a lucky few but left most of the population poor, are inscribed deeply in the stone and the legends which give this town its unique character.

Comparative analysis

In several respects, Diamantina is a faithful mirror of the model of colonial towns in Portuguese-speaking America. It illustrates a similar development with that of Ouro Preto, following the discovery of gold, or of Potosí in Bolivia, where a vein of silver was found. It also stands out, however, because of its exceptionally spectacular landscape, its history (having been subject to special types of governments which "enclosed" it to take greater advantage of the abundance of diamonds on the beds of its streams and rivers), and finally by its architecture, admittedly more sober than other mining towns of Brazil, the towns of gold, but just as refined.

It is distinguished by its paved roads, the *capistranas*, its houses organized into a *casario*, and its churches built without the decorative freestones typical of Baroque architecture but with pediments covered in a rich and colourful profusion of wooden sculpture. From the other side of the narrow Rio Grande valley, from the top of the Serra dos Cristais, Diamantina appears to be comfortably settled on a land with height variations of 150m. This hilly relief has produced an intermingling of winding streets with openings over staggering views. In the middle of this scene, the recently built Cathedral marks the heart of the historic centre.

In the ICOMOS comparative study on the Urban Architectural Heritage of South America, Diamantina is included in the list of cultural properties which should be given priority.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

ICOMOS has noted and supports the intention of the town council to become more involved, in partnership with the National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage and other institutions concerned, in the management of its heritage through the implementation of the Master Plan. The old town is exposed to the danger of changes which need to be controlled. ICOMOS recommends that the Master Plan be adopted before formal inscription on the World Heritage List and that the municipal authorities be endowed with effective and adequate resources, as well as the legal and technical

instruments necessary to enable them to take over the relevant responsibilities.

Furthermore, ICOMOS is of the opinion that an appreciation of the values which distinguish Diamantina from other colonial towns in Portuguese-speaking America gives it a universal character, with the implication that the conservation and development project takes into account not only the landscape of the Serra dos Cristais but also the villages of Extração, Mendanha, Sopa, and others nearby which are an integral part of its history. These villages are under the jurisdiction of the Diamantina authorities.

Brief Description

Diamantina is a colonial village inserted like a jewel in a necklace of inhospitable rocky mountains. It illustrates the human adventure of diamond prospectors in the 18th century and testifies to human cultural and artistic ascendancy over the living environment.

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii and iv*:

Criterion ii Diamantina shows how explorers of the Brazilian territory, diamond prospectors, and representatives of the Crown were able to adapt European models to an American context in the 18th century, thus creating a culture that was faithful to its roots yet completely original.

Criterion iv The urban and architectural group of Diamantina, perfectly integrated into a wild landscape, is a fine example of an adventurous spirit combined with a quest for refinement so typical of human nature.

ICOMOS, September 1999