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Giovanni Carlo Bibbiena, the “Real Barraca” and the old palace of Ajuda

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Giovanni Carlo Sicino Galli Bibiena (1717-1760) was born in Bologna in a famous family of Italian architects and scenographers.
In 1752 Bibiena was hired by the Portuguese king Joseph I. He came to Portugal with his wife Isabel Becaria and his son Giovanni Crisostomo.

The Portuguese king Joseph I wished to implement in Portugal a sort of Italian opera, and Bibiena was committed to put this idea into practice.

Bibiena himself selected some artists to work at pictorial and scenography areas, and hired several Roman artists to work at the Portuguese royal opera, among them was the Italian opera composer, David Perez.
As soon as he arrived in Lisbon, in the beginning of 1752, he was ordered to design three theaters. This is an image of the stage of “Ópera do Tejo” on its opening day on the 31 March 1755 with the opera “Alexander in India”

Architetto del Teatro, Inventore, e Pittore delle Scene

February 1755: 2nd marriage of Bibiena with the portuguese, born in Brasil, Rosa Maria de Jesus. A lot of people attended the marriage, among them the witness João Pedro Ludovici who superintended a lot of the royal constructions.

Church of Santa Catarina do Monte Sinai
But in that very same year of 1755, a very dramatic event was going to change the life of Bibiena and his Italian colleagues, who worked for the Portuguese royal court: the terrible earthquake which destroyed Lisbon on the first of November 1755.
In the aftermath of the terrible event, several colleagues of Bibiena were dismissed, no longer needed in Lisbon. There were other priorities at the time. Ballet dancers, musicians, painters and scenographers returned to Italy.
For example on November 10th 1755, 9 days after the earthquake, Opera House Dancers, Vice-Domini, Alover, Morino, Nevi and Michel, were given a passport to return to Italy.
But Bibiena stayed. On 12 November 1755 he wrote to his brother saying he was worried about “what would happen in the future”.

However, after a few months, Bibiena was already involved in a new project.
This project would be known as the Portuguese “Real Barraca”
A huge barrack made of wood and brick, that would be the residence of the Portuguese royal family for the next forty years.
Terrified by the earthquake, king Joseph I no longer wanted to live in houses made of stone.

The plan of the Real Barraca, designed by Bibiena, illustrates the location of several rooms, location which, in spite of the several works carried out later for a considerable period, would probably remain unchanged for some rooms of common use: Courtrooms (10, 11), Oratory (14) and others
11 – Queen Mariana Vitoria courtroom
10 – King José I courtroom
The courtrooms of the royal family, areas of glamour and power, were covered by crimson clothes and tapestries, and were located in the central area of the palace.
These tapestries, created according to Goya drawings, later decorated the Real Barraca. This one “The lunch” evokes the Madrid quotidian of that time
The oratory, area of prayer, also located in the central area, was also covered in crimson damask, velvet and golden stripe.
Protecting the palace and the royal family, the halberdiers, dressed in red and blue, were present in several ceremonies: “the halberdiers formed aisles in the same room where the marine officers attended me” says the French ambassador, Marquis de Bombelles, reporting a visit to the Portuguese royal court at the Real Barraca.
Close to the central area of the palace the music room was the place where the royal family enjoyed one of its preferred pleasures.
The candles were necessary in everyday routine and also in the lighting of the musical performance’s characters and scenographies to give a contrast of the light and the shade.
According to Bibiena's letter, written in 1757 to the Italian earl Cesar Alberto Malvasia, regarding the project of the palace Malvasia, he praises the perfect connection and adjustment of this palace to the pre-existing surrounding zones.

Likewise Bibiena would adapt and articulate the design of the Real Barraca in Lisbon to the surrounding zones.
He would connect the Real Barraca to the pre-existing “Paço Velho” a palace acquired in the beginning of the eighteen century by King John V, father of king Joseph I.

Neighborhood of Ajuda where is being built the king’s Joseph the first ‘s barrack, after the earthquake
In this image (dated 1763) we see that the Real Barraca and the Ajuda’s Paço Velho are portrayed as the same building.
The old palace's connection to the Real Barraca would last until after the burning of the barrack in 1794, and would remain for over a century connecting the new Ajuda Palace to the old Paço Velho.

The new Ajuda Palace was initiated two years after the fire, and replaced the barrack, being built at approximately the same location.
Here is the archway, which connected the actual Ajuda palace to these 2 buildings (which were very likely outbuildings of the Real Barraca) and to the Paço Velho. This photo was taken in 1939.
Here is a photo of the same archway, which was destroyed in the 20th century, in the decade of 1950.
Since the construction of the “Real Barraca”, the “Paço Velho” was considered its “accessory”. Where, later, the Botanical Garden and the Natural History Museum would be created, for the princes’ studies and education.
In that same Botanical Garden, aerostatic machines would be launched, on two separate occasions, in front of an enthusiastic royal family, and other observers.
In Bibiena’s plan of the Real Barraca we can see a courtyard called “Courtyard which belongs to Paço Velho” which also illustrates the Bibiena’s idea to adapt and articulate the barrack to the pre-existent surrounding zones.
Archaeological researches demonstrate that the Real Barraca was narrower and longer than the actual Ajuda Palace.

The actual Ajuda Palace’s eastward facade was receded in relation to the Real Barraca
The “Pátio da Ópera” was another courtyard of the “Paço Velho” where the “Teatro Real da Ajuda” was built, also known at the time as “Opera house”
Here took place the musical performances so appreciated by the royal family. For example operas like Vicende de la Sorte, Solimano, Faetonte, Alexandre na Índia and others.

The “Teatro Real da Ajuda” (a small theater with a large stage) was constantly being covered and striped of clothes and tapestries, as one can verify in the Royal House’s financial records: “dismantling the Opera House to send the clothes and curtains to Salvaterra” “setting the Opera House for the birthday of infante D. João” “setting the box for the prince due to the measless of infante D. João”.
Here is a plan of Paço Velho in the 18th century. We can see the “Opera house square” on the left and the Real Barraca connection to the Paço Velho on the right. The “Castelhanas courtyard” marked in the picture indicated the place where the Spanish ladies of queen Mariana Vitória, wife of king José I, were housed.
Like all the sections of the Paço Velho, the Teatro Real da Ajuda didn’t burn in the fire of 1794 which destroyed almost all of the Real Barraca
Here is a section of a 19th century map of the new Ajuda Palace and its surroundings. The “Teatro Real da Ajuda” is marked in the picture as well as the “Castelhanas courtyard”
In the 19th century the “Teatro Real da Ajuda” was gradually decaying. In 1870 it was portrayed as “An old building belonging to the Royal Palace, nowadays in ruins”

Nowadays the Opera Courtyard is occupied by military factories, but its name is still remembered by one sign placed on a wall.

Except for this sign, nothing else seems to remember the old theater
This is the Patio da Ópera nowadays.
Very close to the Real Barraca was located the Royal Chapel, also designed by Bibiena.
The Royal Chapel was connected to the Real Barraca by a gallery which had in the late 1750 decade slide glasses held on by braids with tassels in crimson twine. On some celebrations, like prince or princess baptisms, this gallery was occupied by musicians.

“I have never heard and probably I will never hear again such great and touching music” says William Beckford the famous English author who visited Portugal in the final of the eighteenth century.
A testimony of 1761 describes several interior areas of the royal chapel: the baptistery, located on the right after the entry of the church where was installed the canopy bed occupied by the nurse at the baptism of prince D. José, grandson of king José I.

The long ceremony demanded the presence of the nurse. Like many others pieces of furniture the bed was all covered in crimson damask, the plafond included. Two more beds were prepared for the nurse. One in the Saint Christ Chapel, and another at the tribune which was located on a upper level.
The king sat on a throne covered in crimson damask and golden stripe
Near the Royal Chapel, where located the tapestry and the library.
Near the Royal Chapel was built a tower in wood which would be later (1792) replaced by another in stone. In 1792 with the setting-up of the Patriarchal Chapel a lot of works took place which remake the Royal Chapel. The Patriarchal Chapel no longer exists but the tower in stone is still in place as we can see in the next picture.
Real barracks library

Librarian house: ancient tapestry

Tower of the Patriarchal

Photo taken in the beginning of the XX century

In the picture the tapestry and the library have exactly the same position that they have in Bibiena’s plan
The Royal Chapel, the tapestry and the library were located in an upper level towards the Real Barraca and this situation remained with the actual Ajuda palace.
On 23rd of September 1760 Bibiena was made supernumerary architect of palace constructions. He was rewarded for his work by king Joseph I: “...He has served well and loyalty...“

Bibiena died, suddenly, two months later, on the 20th November 1760, at the young age of 43.
What remains of his work at Ajuda?

The Real Barraca was burnt on 1794.

The Royal Ajuda Theater no longer exists.

The chapel and the library, which survived the fire, were destroyed on 1843 and 1917, respectively
At Ajuda still remains today:

The “Sala dos Serenins” built after Bibiena’s death, in a room called the “Conselho do Estado” which was part of Bibiena’s original project.
Although in ruins, what looks to have been the early kitchens of the Real Barraca still remains standing.
And the ancient tapestry, where were located the ornaments and clothes which decorate the Real Barraca in a baroque scenery. The tapestry was later the house of the librarian and is today the *Lar de Stª Isabel da Casa Pia de Lisboa*
Not related to the Real Barraca, but still at Ajuda, stands “Igreja da Memória” (initially a project of Bibiena, which was later modified). The “Igreja da Memória”, whose first stone was cast on 3rd of September 1760, was built by order of king José I, in gratitude for having escaped a murder attempt.
Thank you