

THE ARCHITECTURE AND THE URBAN IMAGE OF ESTADO NOVO IN PORTUGAL, IN THE XX CENTURY



Come up to the subject of urban design and architecture of the 20th cent. today, whatever the point of view or the objective, it's talking or writing about History on a subject which concerns last century.

This distance allows us a wiser and more mature look over the buildings, quarters or, in a wider way, over the production of architecture and urban design in Portugal, in the 40s, at the top of the administration of *Estado Novo*, lead by António de Oliveira Salazar, and before the regime's decay in the 60's.

Or, at least, it should be like that.

But it isn't. In fact, coming up to this subject in a free open-minded way is, still today, an inconvenience for the most part of the architects and urbanists. In schools and mass media, except some rare and honourable cases, it is only possible to talk about the subject in a misstated, dogmatic, or very restricted way. It's not a "culturally correct" subject...

And why?

For those of my generation (60's), in Portugal, but even more for the following – who never got involved in the active live during the Salazar's regime – (I mean those who are able to have some critical power in spite of the total supremacy of the modern materialistic positivism, of the culture of the global society, hyper industrialised, with hard consequences at all levels), it is fair to ask why.

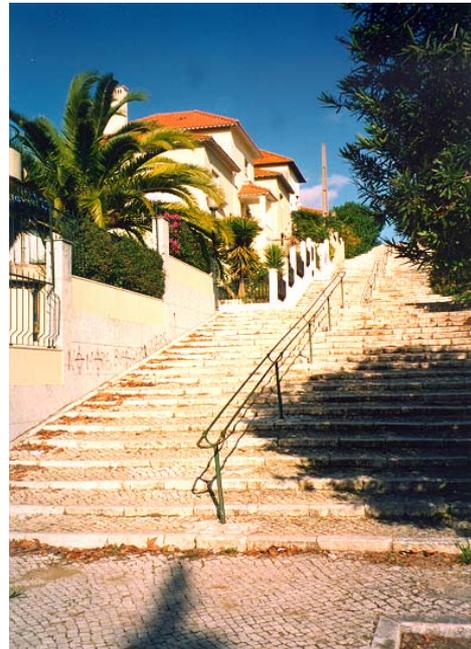
The answer is quite simple: in schools and mass media it still rules an ideology very stressed by modernism today. People with ideologic reasons (a few) or because of personal interests, they don't want or they aren't even able to question what they do or think in alternatives. And a group is created, a lobby, supported by the idea that people are for or against, that it is black or white, or someone belongs to a party, a group or a club (as we want to name it) linked to the modernism, or he's in favour of *Estado Novo* = Salazar's regime.

What a ridiculous situation, deeply anti-democratic and oldfashioned. This mixture of concepts is also linked with the fact that some people from the generations who lived under the administration named *Estado Novo* still have a trauma which prevents them to think clearly about certain aspects and to evaluate, without prejudices, a period of early History of their country. This attitude, understandable or not, has prevented a more open-minded analysis of this period of our History, also in the aspects which concern architecture and urban design.

Therefore, the approach “culturally correct” of the subject under analysis in this text is the one which immediately labels the architectonic/urbanistic production of the time as a mediocre, inconsistent and provincial: “o português suave” (the soft portuguese), etc. – which didn’t bring anything positive for our cities...

For those who insist on this attitude there’s a problem. Bring face to face with the quality of life of some of those “mediocre” quarters, and compared with everything which followed them, it’s not honest to maintain the mistake anymore. Moreover, nothing is completely good or bad. We should be able to evaluate impartially both aspects on its finest details. There was something good in the first ones which persisted and allowed a worthy aging of the urban tissue and the buildings which make part of it, but something deeply wrong happened with the second ones. They degraded quickly, they got old in a bad process and today they are “empty” places with no humanity, independently of the tastes or the fashions.

We can take the example of the eastern area of Lisbon, particularly the quarters of *Encarnação* and *Chelas*.



Encarnação, Lisbon



Chelas, Lisbon

The first one, built in the 40s, is an habitable place today with good quality of life; the second one, as a consequence of the several experiments of modernism in the last 20 or 30 years, became a place of delinquency, of social instability, with serious consequences for the well being of the populations. Where, in spite of the evidence, people insist in experiments and wasting great amounts of the public money, trying to repair what is irreparable.

Architecture and urban design can't be seen no longer as lab-experiences if we consider the factor "Man", with all the implications, including those which concern the way as each one of us relates with the others and the environment.

In this factor or group of relationships there's something of instinctive which can not be eliminated because it can create harmful or even untenable situations for Man and his environment, which deeply affect our physical and mental health. It is a whole devastator cycle of people and territory which can be seen in the modernist city and which is no longer city but anti-city.

Even not being a defender of the Portuguese *Estado Novo*, one should try to understand what ended well and why. In order to be able to bring out conclusions which can be beneficial for the future of our cities. Even considering that some of the buildings and urbanistic heritage, specially those which are institutional and monumental, which were produced on that time under that "label", may not be a masterpiece to be classified or to be adopted as a model, as it is the wrong example of the *alta de Coimbra*.

Well, how can we characterize that architecture, that urban design, labelled of *Estado Novo*?

If we really want to understand it, it will be necessary to describe or characterize all the political philosophy underlying the regime and all the evolution of the national artistic production – including the architecture and the urban design – from late XIX century, from the romantics to the first modernists, talking about the controversy of *Casa Portuguesa* (the portuguese traditional house), about Raul Lino and the traditional naturalistic tendency. In this occasion there's no space for such dissertation; we have to limit to some important characterizing elements of this moment of the architectonic/urbanistic production in Portugal.

The urban design of the city of *Estado Novo* is clearly based on the classical models:

streets, channelled spaces, lanes – axially pointed or stressed with built landmarks – monuments, fountains or others

Av. Sidónio Pais, Lisbon





Areeiro, Lisbon

squares well defined or framed by buildings, with or without galleries.

We feel there's rule, order, sense. There's the gallery, the public garden, the street, the block of houses, the quarter, it has its own scale, humane. It is, however, too much subjected to the ruler-and-square of the planner. There's too much "planning" instead of more "natural evolution" and respect for its laws.

In housing quarters – both in the big cities, towns and villages – there was also the intention of integrating, from region to region, the most characterizing elements of the local traditions. Not only in design but also in building materials, adding new construction method to the ancestral ones and introducing specific systems of production in a bigger scale or in greater quantity – repeating typologies, of constructive elements and others – which sometimes linked to an excessive "planning", becomes too much "rational" and less "natural".

The architectonic design is always of traditional root based in the proportional *canones* and in the classical models – both erudite and vernacular – with accent in the XVIII century standards, such as the *pombalinos*¹ and a restrained ornamental baroque influence.



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¹ "pombaline-style" – after the Marquis of Pombal, Prime-Minister to King Joseph, architecture style developed after the earthquake of Lisbon in 1755.

On the other hand there's an extraordinary strictness on construction and the generous use of noble materials, such as stone, wood and iron.

There's also an excessive use of type models – urbanistic, architectonic or constructive – without looking for a specific diversity of a natural temporary evolution. This aspect, less positive but more difficult to go round, because of priorities and financial availabilities for the several programmes, has been, in many cases, erased by the time because the original models were modified and added. During such process, those groups got the element of “diversity” which was missing in the beginning, sometimes in a successful way and others not so successful.



Social Housing in Restelo, Lisbon

Drawing: Carlos Correia



House in Coimbra

Drawing: Carlos Correia

There's also the symbolic element, side by side with the original classic model, including the erudite and the vernacular in this category. There's a traditional support to which a strange element is added. I'm not talking about the monumental space complex which the *Exposição do Mundo Português* (1940) is an example, in the area of *Belém* in Lisbon, where the symbolic charge and a certain “geometry of the magnificent” is particularly stressed. I'm talking about the city itself – the street, the square, the quarter and the more “familiar” buildings, in which we feel that such stamp of symbolism got into it, that charge, that “strictness”, although in a more diluted way than in the monumental expression.

And perhaps it's that factor or that element, side by side with the original, that doesn't please us. It's like a lack of character. There's an excess of strictness, missing joy and sensibility – roughness vs. lightness. There's neither tolerance nor charme, but there's a solid base.

As Raul Lino said, on the occasion of the *Exposição do Mundo Português*, in 1940: “at least something was proved: the heraldic or ethnographic motives are not enough to print a national mark in a masterpiece, the national character is in the architectonic unspeakable feeling, in the mystery of the proportions, in the nature of the plastic forms, that the artist naturally prefers – using this adverb in its full meaning”.

The picture of a rural Portugal was exhaustively researched stressing traditional values, sometimes without authenticity. In a certain way it's like a scenery – the result is not a product of real factors that come from the environment, from a culture, which has its own formal expression, as a natural reflex, from region to region. Therefore, regarding these architectures, there's a feeling of misconception or incomprehension of the original models of the Portuguese constructive/architectonic tradition with all its richness and diversity – from the granite of the North to the lime of the South, from the coast to the interior. That tradition seems to be disfigured by a strange body, which transforms everything that was

gracious and soft into edgy-rigidness, or deperates exsessively what used to be more complete.

This “rural nationalism” comes into a “confusing aesthetic ambiguity of the *Estado Novo*, in the shy dialectic that kept in its traditional-modernist lines, (...) allowing the compromise between both tendencies (...)”.

Relevant masters on architecture, like Raul Lino, in this century, managed to understand well this richness and these subtleties and produce buildings of unquestionable beauty, which translate or flow a knowledge of tradition that is clearly Portuguese, because it reflects a specific culture with all its diversity and which adapts to the several natural and social circumstances. But sometimes, these masters failed, because they rejected the urban standard and they closed themselves in exclusively rural solutions. In such way they kept feeding the modernist dogma which is urgent to overcome – “the traditionalism is rural and the urbanism is modernist”. It is this misunderstanding that supported the production of architecture and urban design of the XXth century, causing suburbia, dormitory cities and cage-buildings, deeply unrooted.

The fact is that, with the time passing, the walls and the roofs aged and the effects of that “strange body”, of symbolism, have been smoothed, taken away and, today, we appreciate pleasantly a neighbourhood like the *Av. António Augusto de Aguiar* and *Sidónio Pais*, or the square of *Areeiro*... or a quarter like *Restelo*, in Lisbon, or *Cumeada*, in Coimbra, as well as many others all over the country.

Restelo, Lisbon



They have weathered in a healthy way and there we can recognize the qualities established, the archtype, the original standard of the urbanistic, architectonic local tradition, maybe not with the desired quality, but constituting an urban model quite acceptable and pleasant which can be integrated in to the city that we so desperately wish

today. If we are able to get all those ghosts of exaggerated nationalisms and related folklores away, we may introduce a balanced urban and architectonic quality in our cities.

It is in that city we feel well. It is that city that runs and moves because it constitutes a natural reflex of the human being in his relationship with the others, with the surrounding environment and with the universe or the divine.

José Baganha
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