

ARCHITECTURE FOR URBAN RENAISSANCE IN LISBON

Despite the many difficulties facing all who strive for a fairer, more humane and more life-giving city, more and more people, from all professional backgrounds, are taking an interest in this subject:

- This may be because they have come into contact with our work and this has encouraged them (and this Triennial has been fantastic in this respect); or it may also be because, although sometimes wary in matters more related to questions of style, they recognise that the traditional European model of the city has clear environmental, social and even economic advantages in comparison with others that were the outcome of experiments and schemes which had such bad effects in the last century, and whose dire consequences we are going to have to live with for some time to come.

To come now to the subject of my lecture, I must begin by mentioning that when the title was suggested to me, I felt rather apprehensive.

'Urban Renaissance in Lisbon' is a subject that, on a first superficial analysis at least, contains a paradox - there is no 'Urban Renaissance in Lisbon'.

Of course the city itself, the consolidated nucleus that developed up to the middle of the last century, is still nowadays a pleasant place to live, despite the historical centre no longer being residential, the excess of traffic and all the other ills that modern cities suffer from. Everything (or almost everything) that has been done in the last half-century has only contributed to undermining the quality of life in the city, in some cases creating very serious environmental and socioeconomic situations, especially in the outskirts. The small towns in the region have also been affected, some of them disastrously. Sintra, Cascais and other small urban centres, filled with their own life, with precious local landscapes, architecture and culture, have been turned into almost soulless suburbs or dormitory towns. Some of them have narrowly escaped, and are now seeking to repair the damage - a huge task that will take years and years to complete. Even if a fair result is achieved, irreparable scars will still be left.

But it is not all bad. Indeed, in the last few years in Lisbon – I would say since the Chiado was rebuilt after the great fire in 1985 – we have seen a totally unexpected about-turn in the urbanist policy that the project's planner – Álvaro Siza Vieira – adopted (I do not know whether he was overruled, but he was certainly under a lot of pressure from public opinion), in this operation to reconstitute not just the urban fabric but also the pre-existing buildings.

It is a pity that we are left only with a work consisting of façades, or of scenarios, if you will, with no consistency or typological connection in terms of construction or interiors. One of the most significant aspects of the burned Pombaline buildings, their anti-seismic *gaiola* ('cage') structure, was lost. So too was the almost total decorative purity that characterises Pombaline buildings, in particular their mouldings and ornamentation.

However, at that time we began to hear more talk of humility, respect for the surroundings and for the spirit of a place - things that were unthinkable before this time. These aspects are now gradually easing back on to the agenda, in official speeches and professional gatherings.

Henceforth property developers, realising that this type of urban occupation met with public approval, started, albeit timidly, to plan and build large developments that filled 'empty spaces' in the city centre (hence the best areas) with mixed-use facilities (residential, commercial and services). On close inspection these comply very adequately, at least in theory, with what the 'Council for European Urbanism' proposes, which was so well expressed in the Charter of Stockholm.

These models show scale, heights, volumes and street layouts; commerce consists of street shops – where the shop is directly accessible through the street, there are offices and residential dwellings in the same building or in separate ones, but always within the same block.

In other words:

- It's all there! It's fully compliant.

But, ... is there really nothing missing? Is there not a feeling that, in spite of everything, there is something not quite right? What is it?

Firstly, this assessment has to take account of an important factor, the socioeconomic one. These new developments were built for the upper-middle classes. They are like wealthy ghettos with no real mixture of social classes, and this is an aspect in which they clearly fail.

Then there are issues of another type, that in my opinion, although they are very debatable and I myself am not entirely certain about the matter, may contribute to this feeling that something has been left out. I refer to issues related to the choice of architecture - style, if you will.

Where in these buildings is the image that we have of the city of Lisbon? Or is this not important?

Cities do have a particular image, a personality or individuality - Rome, Florence, Bologna, Venice, Paris, London, Barcelona and Lisbon correspond to images that are very clear to us all. What do the images consist of? Isn't it the sum of the parts that makes up the whole?

Isn't this what Nikos Salingaros, Michael Mehaffy and others have been telling us lately? Isn't it this too that Atilio Petruccioli and Cláudio D'Amato of the Bari Polytechnic have been showing us? Isn't this what many of us have long been aware of and tried to express in our work?

That is why I maintain that 'style' counts. I would say there is an almost infinite variety or diversity of approaches or styles that fit the image that each place has. These, taken as a whole, are what make up the distinct city that we all appreciate and recognise as something of value to be preserved.

There is therefore no limit to the exercise of creativity, but there are certain limits that have to do with respect for the city's population and with common sense.

The type or typology that we choose in a project of this nature is not indifferent. Even less so is the style, i.e. the choice we think to be the most refined when we design the façade,

the details we think the most appropriate, modernist, decorative or traditionalist, or when we use a little of each and reinvent a style, or when we go a step forward and improve a tradition.

Whatever the case, I am certain that we should bear in mind the image of the city, the context of the project – of the place, the culture, and the history. Without this, we will fail in every respect, even the commercial one.

Lisbon now needs to understand and put into practice these aspects that I have mentioned regarding its own image and its identity. No less importantly, it needs to realise that its suburbs can also be recomposed in the same way and with the same values, which is indeed already being attempted, albeit hesitantly, in certain places.

In the last models that I have chosen to show you, I include two projects from our studio in Lisbon. One is under construction, near the Museum of Ancient Art – a mixed-use residential and commercial building; the other, where building is expected to start within the next few months, is near the Military Academy, the former Queen's Palace, in a very rundown area of the city. Here we plan to construct several buildings and to renew the urban fabric, completing and giving continuity to the site's existing features. The project envisages a wide variety of uses – public amenities, services, commerce, new housing and the reintegration of various socioeconomic classes. Three students from the Viseu School also worked on this project, as part of a summer holiday programme that we organised at our studio.

A final word about one factor that we must all take into account, and which in a way we have so much neglected in our wish to produce good work, and that is TIME.

It is TIME that in the end makes us right or wrong, granting quality to works of architecture or withdrawing it from them. And this is even truer with regard to success in the city and in the country as a whole.

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Lisbon, September 2004