

## **“Tradition and Heritage in the Contemporary Image of the City”**

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### **“THE VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE OF PORTUGUESE ALENTEJO TOWNS AND VILLAGES A METHODOLOGICAL AND OPERATIVE STUDY”**

**JOSÉ BAGANHA  
ARCHITECT**

This paper follows on from the treatise on "Vernacular Architecture of Portuguese Alentejo Towns and Villages", of my doctorate degree in the Department of Architecture of the University of the Basque Country.

This essay further develops the field of study in more detail to provide a better, more comprehensive and well-reasoned understanding of the uniqueness of the towns and villages of the Alentejo region, the various aspects and expressions of its grassroots urban morphology and architecture, varying from place to place and with differences that are sometimes very subtle but also very interesting. I also address herein the relationship or interdependence of constructed space and free space - a mutually dependent or inseparable relationship that forms a coherent and single whole.

I will try to summarise the study materials during this presentation, which are organised in the way indicated in the table of contents. Since I have a lot of information and unfortunately do not have time to talk about everything, I will present entire chapters based only on the title.

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The aim of this study is to use all the cultural uniqueness, the rich source, the quality of space in the Alentejo towns and villages, the interventions we today undertake in those towns and villages, agricultural estates and in cities, in urban or architectural terms, to take a new but deeply ecological erudite approach without ideological bias.

This work is, therefore, one with clear operational goals, a methodological study if we like, and not a mere list or exhaustive survey in a nostalgic or melancholic tone in order to "set down" or "save" certain, more preserved places for museum reference, often stripping them of their own life and sense of being.

It seems evident, and even urgent that solutions are found, in view of a more or less predictable and quite likely scenario of loss of character and environmental degradation that the phenomena of globalisation and mass tourism are likely to generate in this region, as they have done elsewhere in southern Europe. These solutions should enable new investments and generate more well-being for local populations, without necessarily implying a loss of identity.

It is also in this proactive and dynamic perspective, and not a static or museum-oriented one, that I set out to undertake this study.

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It is now a universally accepted fact that the City (in the broadest sense of the term) is the No. 1 issue with regard to environmental sustainability. The city is the basis of the three pillars of sustainable development - physical, environmental and economic. Its form and structure must therefore be studied in each region, taking into account the specific particulars.

And this undoubtedly includes a more humane city, more sustainable interventions in the urban, architecture and construction areas, looking for those, sometimes so simple solutions that were always at our fingertips, that seem made for a certain place and no other, as if "sprouting up from the ground".

## **METHOD**

I have adopted a geographic concept of region, rather than merely following the administrative boundaries, to carry out this task. The concept I have used is the geographical division defined by Professor Amorim Girão, cited or included in the magnificent work that constitutes the "Survey of Vernacular Architecture in Portugal".

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I have selected some of the towns and villages I visited in each region - those that seemed most representative of the respective specificity or uniqueness that is focused on here.

There are several approaches to the study of the city - economic, historical, etc... - and all are important. However, I am interested here in studying the form.

Once the sub-regions had been defined and the most significant case studies identified, these places had, of course, to be visited, photographed, drawn (as in this study drawing I did in Évora), information gathered, in an attempt to understand the people who populate the Alentejo region, their habits, their stories.

In this work of collecting data and analysis, the most recent interventions are also found. These are usually of two types:

- Works designed by architects or engineers:
  - Like this one presented here. It is an intervention by the Central Government of Portugal in Vila Viçosa, in the 1940s, in which they destroyed a significant portion of the old city centre to build a monumental avenue topped off by a castle;
  - Or a "minimalist" intervention in a square in Arraiolos to build an underground car park, developed by the local town council.
- Or works of a spontaneous nature.

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This work would of course not be complete without the study of other essays and miscellaneous iconographic material on the subject.

## GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE TERRITORY

In this essay I present a historical and geographical analysis of the Alentejo region in order to contextualise and better understand the urban and architectural forms of its towns and villages. Unfortunately, we do not have enough time to fully develop this topic, which is an indispensable component for study in order to better understand the urban and architectural peculiarities of this region.

Hence, the history and geography of the region was studied:

- Its natural landscape;
- Geology;
- The rivers of the Alentejo region;
- Climate;
- Plants;
- etc.

The Urban Landscape was also studied.

It seems to me to be essential, and despite us not having much time, to mention some important or crucial aspects of the urban landscape of the Alentejo region.

In fact, the region is a unique territory in the context of urbanism and vernacular architecture in Portugal. Time has quite significantly preserved the authenticity of its formal urban and constructive expressions.

In a manner or process that we could classify as spontaneous, innate, the people of Alentejo have shown wisdom that comes from tradition, in its true and unique dimension, i.e. which does not exclude innovation, evolution.

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An example of this is Marvão, in North Alentejo. We can list some of the common features of the towns and villages of the various sub-regions - the common denominator - so to speak, which are:

- Concentration of the dwellings in well-defined and dense settlements;
- Clear definition of the volumes - simple and very precise volumes;
- Horizontality is dominant in an arrangement of volumes in which each part is essential to the whole;

Here is the same town – Marvão – viewed from above. Here we can clearly see the concentration of dwellings and the other features stated above. This is also borne out by these photographs of Evoramonte and Mértola. It is this uniqueness that attracts us; it is this urban quality that we recognise and which also primarily motivated this study.

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The following chapter looks at URBAN AND ARCHITECTURAL/CONSTRUCTIVE TYPES. Today, we shall focus more on URBAN TYPES and their MORPHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS.

We shall start by looking at the FORMATION OF URBAN FABRIC – EVOLUTION AND CONSOLIDATION.

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Using the city of Évora as an example, and extrapolating for most towns of the region, the core of these towns was formed with the Roman city, "ex novo", or by occupying ancient forts - and they then advanced through the medieval era growing beyond the walls, "limes", and forming new nuclei or following the main roads, repeating the urban and architectural types of the original nucleus. The towns progressed like this until they acquired their final form in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, with new walls.

The process in Vila Viçosa is very similar. I also highlight here the development of its *ensanche* [new nuclei due to expansion], until the consolidated form of its current historic centre.

But, in addition to expansion and consolidation we also see decline and abandonment.

An example of this phenomenon is Montemor-o-Novo, where the town moved to, shall we say, a lower level to be alongside the new transport link. Another example is Juromenha, which was simply abandoned. There are a number of other examples that we could talk about here

Up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the advance of liberalism and extinction of the religious orders and the period of Regeneration, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the century, nothing of significance is noted in these towns and villages. At this time, the more bourgeois towns - a rising class – stood out with their public infrastructure, public gardens, barracks, libraries and court houses, among others.

The public interventions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are also to be mentioned. In fact, and since the 1940s, the cities and towns of the country were subject to various interventions. The 1<sup>st</sup> phase was a campaign of "improvements" of the more "monument-like" architectural heritage, so to speak, as was the case of the intervention in Vila Viçosa I spoke about earlier.

After this campaign, court houses, libraries, museums and other institutional buildings were built - like these that we see here, the Frontier library - or a bank branch in Alandroal. The result was often of dubious taste and having a devastating effect on the quality of the urban spaces where they were built. This is true for both buildings and the supposed "landscaping" of outdoor spaces, such as parks or squares, with many imposing solutions that clearly reflect the willingness of the designers and/or developers to make a strong statement.

## **Outdoor spaces**

Outdoor spaces complement the built environment and both, inseparably joined, contribute to the location's identity or uniqueness.

In the towns and villages of Alentejo, we find places that "fit" into the concept of square as we identify it today - a place of public recreation, suitable for gathering and a large variety of civic events, both social and religious.

Morphological analysis of population hubs allows us to highlight this built space – open space relationship on the streets but also, for example, through the set of private outdoor spaces - courtyards and common areas adjacent to buildings - often of small size. We can also add the urban vegetable gardens to this group. The former are spread throughout the urban fabric, while the private vegetable gardens are predominantly located at the periphery of clusters (regardless of there being town walls), and they are almost always surrounded by walls that often contain small citrus groves, which helped to curb the urban expansion.

## **Urban facilities and furniture**

The sober nature, quite “minimalist” that characterises these towns and villages is also embodied in the streets and squares, and the street furniture adds to that soberness.

The main items are:

- Fountains;
- Water sources;
- Drinking fountains;
- Water troughs;
- Benches;
- Pillories;
- Suspended flower troughs and Flower beds;
- Water tanks;

## **Functional structure**

The towns and villages of Alentejo are also diverse functional structures. In fact, in addition to housing, these clusters also contain spaces intended for commerce, cultural spaces - museums, theatres, cinemas, etc., spaces for religious worship, spaces for institutional use - town halls, barracks, court houses, among others - and also those of light industries, craft industries and workshops, as we see here in this drawing I did of a street in Vila Viçosa.

This diversity of uses is greater the larger the dimensions of the respective village and town.

Uses more focused on trade tend to concentrate in the more central areas of the towns, as do the most important institutional uses. In many cases, fairs and markets continue to be held in the major squares.

The larger-scale urban rehabilitation interventions of modern times are also analysed.

## **Architectural / Constructive Types**

This essay includes a detailed analysis of these types. It is found that the division by sub- regions adopted for the purposes of classification does not prevent a common feature from being clearly observed, a common image in the vernacular architecture of this region of the country.

This type analysis – for which there is no time here to analyse in depth – clearly shows that a major feature of these buildings is precisely the strong presence of rural grassroots architecture.

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At its origin is the vernacular, anonymous housing of the towns and villages of the Alentejo region, which copies the region’s farmhouses - such as these that we see here on the Torre de Palma estate, close to Fronteira (now converted into a luxury hotel) - and the morphology of the terrain is adapted to the small size of the space within the walls.

The simplicity and excellent adaptation to the adversities of the climate of these rural models are imported into the towns and villages and give rise to new, diverse types, but with common characteristics.

These main features can be identified from region to region. Here are some examples that I have photographed or drawn.

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The analysis covers the aspects of composition and all other features of this architecture, as well as the processes and building materials that heavily contribute to the uniqueness of this type.

## **CONCLUSION**

It seems to me that I can conclude by stressing that the urban concentration would seem like a better solution than dispersal and that the latter should be hindered, insofar as possible. In this context, it is evident that there is a need to respect built space – empty space relationships – whether public or private, including the ratios of street widths with the dominant boundary markers, the existence of gardens and orchards, including narrow streets, squares and other public spaces.

We must learn from the experiences of the past to extract everything that might be beneficial today and in the future, from a perspective without compromise, assuming the spirit of discovery, creativity and innovation to the ancient wisdom. We must seek out a new synthesis genuinely appropriate to the medium in which we live and intervene in environmental, as well as cultural and socioeconomic terms, combining compositional lexicons and traditional types with contemporary way of life, thereby contributing to this purpose of protection, preservation and affirmation of local identities.

We will also have to be able to adopt and promote the industries and renewed traditional craft industries and the equilibrium of local commerce in the neighbourhoods in which housing predominates, and with an appropriate distribution of public services.

I can also conclude from my research that, even taking into account the centuries of existence of many of the towns and villages, and despite all the vicissitudes of abandonment and change, these and their architecture persevere and preserve their extraordinary qualities, with a resilience that permits their rehabilitation or “renaissance” in a new era, filled with peace and harmony.