

REGIONAL ARCHITECTURE IN PORTUGAL – THREE PROJECTS

INTRODUCTION

In preparing this paper, following the kind invitation of my friends Luigi Molo and Gabriele Tagliaventi, whom I warmly thank along with all the organisers of this conference, I set out to choose three projects developed by Atelier José Baganha Arquitectos that fitted well into the various themes suggested. They consist of works already completed or still in the planning stage that illustrate the present Portuguese reality in terms of urban design and land use. They deal with urban land (the consolidated city); rural land, including the nuclei on the outskirts of the large agglomerations of populations (the small towns and villages “swallowed up” by the urban sprawl); and agricultural land (more and more deserted, due to the migrations of populations seeking better living conditions - whether illusory or not - and as a result of the disastrous European Common Agricultural Policy).

Bearing this in mind, we have chosen three very recent projects, one already completed and built, and the other two still in the planning stage:

- I. A residential condominium in Lisbon called “Janelas Verdes”;
- II. An urban development in Aldeia de São Silvestre, on the outskirts of Coimbra;
- III. A tourist complex at Herdade da Agolada de Cima, in Coruche – Master Plan.

These three projects also reflect (to a large extent) the tendency in the commissioning of projects in Portugal in the area of architecture and urban design. This tendency contains a series of challenges and difficulties that in terms of ethics, coherence and professionalism confront all those of us in Portugal who are striving to produce work along the lines of the so-called “Urban Renaissance”. By this we mean the continuity of the architectural and urban design tradition of the European city, with all the peculiarities that this tradition contains, an extremely rich individuality that represents the most effective antidote I know against the “poisons” of the internationalisms that

during the 20th century have spread with catastrophic results at all levels. They have done this not only in our cities and territory, but also in the way we eat and dress, affecting everything we consume, even in our free time, and doing away with the richness of the cultural peculiarities of the “Old Continent”. I can honestly find no advantage in the fact that we are all the same, eating the same things, in or out of season, living in the same cities and buildings, in whatever part of the world – I really can't. I don't want you to think that I suffer from some kind of allergy to the inventive capacity of the Human Being. This is one of the most fallacious arguments used by all those who, driven by I know not what instinct of repulsion for all kinds of tradition, try to invent the wheel every five minutes and are obsessed with innovation as the only purpose of their lives: the different being, the innovative being, the brave new world. Innovation, however, is no longer what it was and we are lucky that today we are all becoming aware of the importance of picking up again the thread of history, putting the “river of time” back in its bed, innovating and always improving in the preservation of what is essential in our cultures.

That is why I mentioned the difficulty that may face us in these types of commissions, as it may be thought, at first glance, that the concepts they embrace – condominium / development / tourist complex – do not constitute some of the main “evils” from which our lands suffer.

In fact, the tendency has been this:

- Residential condominiums – “ghettoes of the rich” – tend to be large, walled properties of opulent, isolated dwellings, snuggling amid golf courses, equestrian clubs, etc., leaving outside their gates the miseries, shantytowns and rundown neighbourhoods, and linked to the big office centres by ever more congested motorways;
- The urban developments in the suburbs have been, along with the aforementioned residential estates, one of the most obvious evils in the outskirts of our cities, taking over land often rich in landscape and agricultural potential with “duty-free garden cities” – pastiches of depressing suburbs, imported from North America, in which we

isolate populations, prisoners of the car, of consumption in the nearest large shopping centre and of the soul-destroying way of life that models of this type produce and by which they have been produced;

- The tourist complexes, or “resorts”, are another of the scourges that have been ravaging the country since the 1970s, transforming our shores and coastlines (and now our countryside as well) into a stockroom of supposedly “traditional” architecture, much in fashion, produced by people who understand nothing of traditional architecture and much less of traditional urban planning. These specialists in “resorts”, together with specialists in the “market”, golf and an array of consultants, set up “fantastic” teams able to produce a “master plan” or a “layout” in a fortnight (this type of “specialist’s” favourite terminology, which dazzles most of the less-informed developers and nearly always produces results that are too artificial).

What can we do then? Reject this type of commission? Of course not! The projects we present here are proof, in our view, that it is possible to provide a quality solution to the challenges posed by this type of commission.

In the first example we set out to install a luxury condominium in the grid of a historical district of Lisbon, using traditional urban design and architectural language. In the second example we succeeded in developing an area of land in a village on the outskirts of Coimbra, giving continuity to the existing urban fabric, creating streets, squares and blocks of buildings with architecture inspired by local models, and integrating commerce and services with the various levels of housing (for various social strata);

In the third project we developed a Master Plan for a tourist complex for mainly residential tourism – providing housing for populations from other countries is one of the latest trends in Portugal. In doing this we preserved the traditional cultures of the region, the Ribatejo, such as oak plantations, creating dense nuclei of concentrated new construction. Instead of building on large plots, dotting the landscape with architecture unsuited to the region, we created “villages” from scratch, modelled on the regional nuclei in terms of scale and shape and integrating the tourist facilities, including hotels,

harmoniously into the landscape, and searching for solutions, shapes and systems belonging to the regional culture.

To sum up, therefore, we present three projects with a very contemporary theme in the places where they are situated, which are contrary to the trend of the offer, of the more ordinary and “passé” models, returning to solutions and languages that belong to the local region in which they are installed.

This choice undoubtedly entails extra work, since it is not enough to use any old “recipe” of the more or less “picture postcard” type, superficial and false. Instead, it involves the careful study of typologies, history, culture, habits and local customs. This certainly means work, but the results are infinitely more satisfactory, not only for us but mainly for those for whom the work is intended and everyone else who will benefit from it.

I. Residential condominium “das Janelas Verdes”, in Lisbon.

The condominium called “das Janelas Verdes” is located on the southern boundary of the Lapa district of Lisbon, close to the Museum of Ancient Art.

Facing three streets (Rua Presidente Arriaga, Travessa de D. Brás and Rua do Olival), it is situated in an area formerly occupied by very rundown buildings of various types. On the southern side there used to be a 18th century mansion, also very rundown, of which we managed to preserve only two floors of the side facing the street, adding on a floor with a mansard roof in the language of this type of 18th century Portuguese building.

In the new project we included three diverse blocks, thus solving a problem of scale. In fact, in view of the size of the programme, which envisaged a large built area (roughly 6,500 m² above ground level), it would have been inappropriate to have uniform typology and volumes.

We therefore decided to “break up” the original plan into three distinct blocks with a shared lower-ground floor and internal courtyard. This resulted in volumes and an appearance that were more diversified and on an urban scale more appropriate to the setting (consisting of a series of “small” façades in a sequence, interrupted now and then by a more sizeable building – the mansion, the church – or by a small square).

In the design of these new blocks we included the characteristic typologies of the location, the Lapa district, which, like other Lisbon districts of the period, had very plain lines and simple volumes, derived from the Pombaline model created just after the great earthquake of 1755. Here, in these districts with their rather more vernacular flavour compared with the original models of the period from the downtown area of the city, the proportion, the interplay between the “full and the empty”, the materials (the plaster smoothed with a trowel, the “pipe” tiles, the eaves, the square blocks of limestone), the jaggedness - everything contributes, together with this interplay of volumes and scale, to a whole that entirely fits the setting (“as if it had always been there”).

Inside the blocks there are fifteen apartments with very generous areas, intended for a section of the population with considerable purchasing power; apartments with sophisticated facilities, high-quality finishing materials and large number of parking spaces. A good many of these apartments have excellent views of the River Tagus.

II. Urban development in São Silvestre, Coimbra.

This project concerns an urban development study being implemented in São Silvestre, Coimbra.

The area that is the object of the study is part of an old farmstead in the centre of the village of São Silvestre. Its boundaries are marked by buildings, mainly for single-family housing, that are characteristic of the oldest part of the village, to the southwest; by the main farmhouse, still inhabited by the family owning it, including gardens and outbuildings, to the south; and by municipal streets to the north, west and east. It does

not contain any features worthy of mention, or even any notable vegetation, apart from a small watering-pond. The site is completely walled in and crossed by a watercourse in its eastern boundary, which is piped downstream.

The study we present results from the application of a typology whose model or archetype is the one that is characteristic of the villages or smaller urban nuclei of this region, of which São Silvestre still conserves some remnants, particularly in the more central areas adjoining the plots that are the object of this study.

In the urban design we tried to reconcile, as harmoniously as possible, the original model or archetype, the context, with present-day needs (more dependent on the car) and with the applicable legislation and regulations in force. We envisage blocks in an organic grid, with buildings of two or three floors above ground level (mainly two floors), streets (“canal spaces”) and squares, making use of paths, thoroughfares or streets already existing in the surroundings, and providing inside these blocks, whenever possible, public areas for the enjoyment of residents and/or a car park.

The buildings planned, which form a dense nucleus of blocks in continuous strips, are intended mainly for single-family housing, although there are also some buildings for multi-family housing and units for commerce and/or services on the ground floor. They thus provide for a variety of uses that will help to make the urban environment more humanised, less segregated, safer and more convenient, providing the residents with their more basic needs (which is indeed a key characteristic of the original model on which this study was based).

The public area is covered with stone pavement, ensuring, however, that the regulatory distances for pedestrian and motor traffic and the car park are adhered to. The differentiation or separation between these areas is achieved as subtly as possible, using posts, railings and metal or other items whose design will be defined in more detail in a later stage of this project. This complies with another basic, fundamental premise for conformity with the original typological model adopted.

The proposed land structure also follows the model of the surroundings, with plots for single-family dwellings or buildings (the majority) and/or mixed ones (including commerce) with the rear façade facing the street, as in the whole village, and with an open internal area, with gardens or paved, and including at least one parking space per home within the block (in a garage or in this internal open area). This aspect is key to the urban planning model adopted and contributes to a more humanised enjoyment of the public area, creating more solid neighbourhood relations.

It also avoids the single-purpose models of “dormitories”, isolated single-family dwellings, which have proliferated on the outskirts of Coimbra as well as here in São Silvestre. These, rather than encourage neighbourly relations, lead to isolation and segregation in which the residents are prisoners of the car for their most minor needs. We intend to create here an urban atmosphere in the true sense of the term.

The size of the plots and the areas of occupation and construction envisaged were also based on the study of the typologies existing in the locality. We have identified certain types that can later freely adopt the variants that their owners prefer, always using criteria of integration through sympathy, respecting the context and contributing towards an environment that is intended to continue, or follow on from, the more original nucleus of the village.

The farmstead and its gardens, also walled, will be preserved. This will maintain a free “buffer” area between the garden and the new development, which will also be surrounded by walls, including an access through a main gateway.

Following meetings with the representatives of the local parish council, two plots or areas are set aside as green spaces and for communal facilities, which may be complementary. They are situated in the extreme northeast of the site, and incorporate the watercourse that may also be piped or form part of the landscape design to be developed in a later stage of this project. In accordance with the wishes of the council representatives, the chosen location provides for a more effective relationship with the surrounding areas, facilitating access routes and uses.

III. Herdade da Agolada de Cima tourist complex, in Coruche – Master Plan.

Herdade da Agolada de Cima is an agricultural estate with an area of approximately 929.48 hectares. It is situated in the municipality of Coruche, north of Vale do Sorraia and about 6 km from the town of Coruche, in the Ribatejo region of Portugal.

The Master Plan (DP) for Herdade da Agolada de Cima resulted from an investment project in the tourism area, which the present owner intends to develop. The owner is supported in this by the local authorities, on account of the development it will bring to this region due to its nature and size.

Furthermore, agriculture in this region has been heavily impacted since the reform of the CAP, and it is urgent to find alternatives for the resident population by creating employment opportunities and ways of creating wealth. Tourism is obviously one of the more viable activities these days, and indeed successive governments have been promoting this as a planning policy.

Within the scope of the review of Coruche's Municipal Regulatory Plan (MMP), proposed alterations arising from this Master Plan have already been considered, even though they appear to have very little relevance, due to their one-off nature and their practically null impact on the site and on the municipality.

The Herdade da Agolada de Cima Master Plan considers three distinct and at the same time complementary types of occupation:

- a) Areas allocated for tourism;
- b) Low-density developable areas;
- c) Agricultural production areas.

The areas allocated for tourism cover various Execution Units – Rural Hotels, Tourist Villages (urban buildings suitable for tourism) and other hotel facilities – Golf Hotels, “Charm Hotels”, etc., Equestrian Centres, Nautical Centres, Golf Courses, etc. – which

may eventually be developed in phases, integrating the tourism component and real estate [depending on the type of enterprise(s) to be developed], and also including a component that is booming in the south of Europe – Residential Tourism.

These Execution Units will be situated mainly in the surrounding area north and east of the estate's dam, and here and there in the western and south-western areas. The buildings will occupy the areas that are not part of the National Ecological Reserve.

The tourist occupation will, furthermore, meet a condition that is also its major attraction: it will be fully integrated into the present environment, preserving its qualities and benefiting from its potential; it will improve the quality of the land, re-create the characteristic landscape of the locality, preserve water courses and water-producing areas, re-plant native species and so forth. The green recreation area (including private and public golf, a theme park or parks and other attractions) will be the element that links and improves the occupations of a more "urban" character.

Extensive agricultural-forest areas will thus be preserved, and the agricultural activities continued (the oak plantation in the west and the eucalyptus in the east), and these areas will form an integral part of the tourist enterprise to be developed.

In the area bordering the estate, adjoining the municipal roads to the east, in the places where the urban expansion of the town of Coruche has been carried out more recently with low-density occupation and a certain amount of dispersion or fragmentation (the "forums"), it is proposed to implement an occupation with a denser nucleus, next to the municipal road and the neighbouring agglomeration. This will continue the area's improvement through an "urban" quality that, though still "rural" in character, will have other uses that are not exclusively residential: in the tertiary area – commerce and services – and infrastructure, providing a certain "centrality" and humanisation to an area that, by being too fragmented, shows a poor quality of urban design.

This Master Plan, taken as a whole, represents a valid, quality alternative to the models of dispersed construction that have been appearing in Portugal, as in other regions of southern Europe.

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