

Some premises for a new architecture

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Some premises for a new architecture¹

Although, on the one hand, architectural production in Portugal has followed the evolution of the European architectural culture (to which it attributes its "natural" absence of critical reflection), Marcelo Caetano era and technocracy have not been able, even at the quantitative level, to improve the internal characteristics of current production. The adjustments that capitalist Europe needed to adapt its investments to the Portuguese social structure served only to provoke a sclerosis phenomenon.

Even though during this period the political resistance was as real as it was tragic, it is necessary to confess that in the specific domain of architecture, it did not have, even for those who were committed to the political struggle, consequences on the theoretical plane, except for the experiences "of practice-criticism" of architecture as a system of precepts. Having found that it was impossible for a profound reversal of the system that began in the architect, during this period there was no systematic effort to analyze the architectural production sector as an ideological scheme. This absence is essentially lacking in the daily work of the teams in charge of carrying out the new programmes (new in quantity, as well as in quality) coming from April 25, 1974, where previous relationships (the role of the architect and client...) tend to reproduce themselves with surprising ease.

For two years, our critical reflection has been monopolised by the priorities of the political struggle and risks, prolonging the uncritical situation of previous architectural practices, or overly evaluating the process triggered since April 25, which, despite everything, remains limited to "what is possible" in architecture. Now, this reflection on "what is possible" should cover, in addition to the ideological explanation of architectural production as a system of knowledge, the analysis of the possible transformations of the architect's role. This is as necessary as the architect's relations with power change with the nature of this very power. Can we talk about the same client-architect relationships when tenant committees become the masters of SAAL operations? We would be content to briefly indicate some of the critical experiences to which we have just referred. Because, despite their rudimentary formalization, they constitute in our view, attempts for a systematic disassembly of the current conditions of our architectural production, in a perspective that we would like to be socialist.

FOR A CRITICAL PRACTICE OF ARCHITECTURE

Two trends dominate the Portuguese architectural production of the 1960s: the first, italianizing, of organicist and neorealist origin, which appears mainly in programs of social housing and collective equipment financed by the State. The second, associated with "tourist development", denotes, at the language level, on the one hand, a certain "folk" Mediterranean influence, and on the other hand, an Anglo-Saxon type of functioning that comes from the brutality or the international style.

In addition to these, a new trend is emerging with these two forms of expression. Although certain projects are not, by their nature, more representative of a dimension or urban integration, they have at least the merit of demonstrating the signs of this rupture. This trend is called "formalism" by advocates of the fictitious (ideological) neutrality of a functional adequacy, which hastily assumes the distributive organization charts of any imported method. But it is precisely by acting on the mechanisms of form, questioning institutionalized vocabularies, and practicing "the composition", as a significant articulation of the different elements of the program in their relations with the place, that this trend is demarcated from the Modern Movement (or from what, in Portugal, was considered its orthodox application). Recognizing the limits of such autonomy, that is, demystifying architecture as an "autonomous machine," is only possible through a lucid action, desacralizing the language of architecture and its internal systems.

Resulting from a circumstantial practice defined by the commission, without convergence of theoretical assumptions, these young architects try to break with the dominant currents of a bureaucratic architecture, denouncing the arbitrariness of architectural codes and systems of norms, through austerity and purification.

This attitude was already present, although nuanced with romanticism, in Siza's work; in others, it is a distrust of the picturesque and a reductive will inherent to the critical manipulation of the discourse of the composition. The use of a minimalist poetics advocated by certain architects, returns to the forms of architecture of the 1920s, curiously eliminated during Salazar dictatorship². Although minimalist, the exploration of the lack of functionality of superfluous space was used in very limited budgets by Vítor Figueiredo, for example³. This work of critical manipulation of the composition discourse relies on what could be called architectural "genres"; collage and reference become simple structural (of) composition laws, reinforcing the internal artifice of architectural play. For example, by opposing "the language" of surface used by "organicist" architects during the 1960s (description of different matter through meticulous work of the joints) to a rationalist skeleton of the Renaissance order (the plan is itself sacrilegious), one finds the basis for a critical analysis of the compositional process: these references show the ideological permanence of certain rules underlying the architectural production⁴.

Moreover, the use of an existing façade, emptied of its context and glued to a new building- form, tries not to disguise the typical phenomenon of progressive sclerosis of the historic centers, clearly expressing the densification of the built volume by the superimposition on a referent-memory of the world urban fabric. The continuity of contiguous facades, suggested by the membrane surrounding the upper floors, sends back to a discourse derived from a strongly characterized interior space, a kind of "crack" where the complexity of the internal circulation system extends⁵.

The critical object

Another form of subversion of the dominant architectural production leads us to a new type of project that, also based on the manipulation of the discourse of composition, sees both the project and the built object as autonomous products. This approach, by normative essence, isolates the projected object from the place where it is located to assign it a punctual meaning.

It appropriates the basic elements of the historical repertoire (the outdoors wall, the arch, the indoors wall), taking the risk of a synthesis and erecting it as a monument. This exaltation of the "public" function of the building supposes that its identification is possible by the play of a collective memory⁶.

In other projects, the construction enveloping can become the container of external space. This inversion translates not only an inversion of the rational tradition that requires the building to be made from the inside to the outside, but also an investigation into the role of the façade as a tension plane (dialectical mediation of the inside-outside

relationship)⁷. This way of characterizing spaces finds common points with the work of L. Kahn⁸.

Considering that the pre-existing environment is somehow ignored or diminished, architecture itself becomes "a location". In addition to this attitude of rupture, it ensures the function of seminal germ for a disqualified fabric by inverting the tradition that required the project to integrate in continuity with the setting. It is necessary to remember that in Portugal, the influence of European rationalism was systematically repulsed by the fascist power, which, fearing a corruption of customs, opposed any proposal of type "Tabula Rasa" made by Le Corbusier or the Modern Movement, while encouraging a return to integration by assimilation and reproduction of the "national" style.

Some projects of the 1960s had already placed the principle of new relations between architectural intervention and the site, based on the interpretation of the urban continuum limited to marginal signs, visual sequences, or gauge scales within which new relations of tension or opposition⁹ could be created at the formal level, or retrieve certain color or texture¹⁰ constants. The problem of the integration of architectural objects is henceforth placed in dialectical terms from the acceptance of certain urban continuities, but also from their own denial.

ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN SEGREGATION

On another level, some architects questioned the dominant urban segregation that presided over peripheral expansion operations of private or public initiative. The manufacture of naturalistic urban images, nostalgic views of the garden city, based on the notion of "green space" as a mediation element between separate and sliced functions (circulations, housing, equipment), and a composition of the different types of construction (turn, barre...) irregular, scattered and picturesque. All this corresponded to the universally widespread urban system in Europe, founded on the proliferation of neighbourhood units on a human scale.

In this context, we will understand the critical power represented by the proposals based on the unification of construction to circulation systems or on the use of different typologies in connection with the street and as internal space of the islets that are no longer considered as residual space¹¹.

The recovery of certain recent theoretical assumptions of Anglo-Saxon origin, the typological citations of *Siedlung* and its articulation in an integrated grid tend to eliminate any moralistic attitude towards the insertion of the monument in the urban fabric; we can then rediscover the historical processes of city formation based on the potential of simple repetitive rules, the same ones that created Pombal's Lisbon, the downhill neighborhoods and those of the beginning of the century.

We find a reflection of this articulation between urban space and architecture in other projects that, through greater geometric rigor and a strong definition of space are based on an opposition of different urban situations such as the square, the street, the avenue, the passage, and many others that seek to escape a certain mimicry of neorealist origin and a "populist" architecture that is intended on a human scale.

The metaphor of the city, thus, takes its full meaning in the form of a construction that evokes "a wall", which reinforces the dichotomy between an exterior – massive and almost with no windows – and an interior that lets collective life of users shine through¹².

In this type of project, there is an implicit position of refusals of a certain abstract technological determinism, which would diminish the significant strength of architecture; on the contrary, we can perceive in a very clear way the social vision of a collective grouping that is organized into small forts, islets of resistance embedded in a hostile urban fabric, in the image of the oppressive system.

¹ For editorial reasons, the images accompanying this text are not published.

² Adega and Zambujal.

³ See page 30.

⁴ Cascais.

⁵ Collective residence.

⁶ Youth Hostel, Beja.

⁷ Telheiras, Chelas, MV.

⁸ Querias, RH.

⁹ Av. da Ponte, Siza.

¹⁰ Caxinas, Siza.

¹¹ Restello.

¹² S.A.A.L. MV