

The 25th of April and the transformation of the city

Álvaro Siza Vieira (1933-)

To cite this paper: VIEIRA, Álvaro Siza – The 25th of April and the transformation of the city. **Estudo Prévio** 20. Lisboa: CEAECT/UAL – Center for Studies of Architecture, City and Territory of the Autonomous University of Lisbon, 2022, p. 87-89. ISSN: 2182-4339 [Available at: www.estudoprevio.net]. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26619/2182-4339/20.18> Published from **Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais** No. 18/19/20, February 1986, p. 37-40.

Creative Commons, CC BY-4.0 license: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

The 25th of April and the transformation of the city

Conserving the city-inverting the city. Designed city-spontaneous city. Tradition-innovation. Desire-quality. Responsibility of the designer and city as a collective construction. Processes of participation: rebirth or fragmentation.

I speak as an architect and of being an architect; I speak of the transformation of the city, place par excellence of architecture in the face of a sudden change.

1. The 25th of April 1974, made possible the intervention of popular movements fighting for housing and the right to the city, movements for many years controlled/repressed.

For the architects, it opened a vast and urgent field of design, based on the direct and diversified participation of populations.

Few responded to this call, due to the precarious working conditions, proven to the exclusion and survey, of unknown results.

For those who accepted the order – professionals, students, and trainees – the adaptation to the new conditions created was difficult and unforgettably stimulating.

From this period of work, in a climate of enthusiasm, conflict, solidarity and ambiguity, I know a little about what happened in the city of Oporto.

We can say that there were and there are still two cities: the apparent and representative one and the hidden city of the interiors of the block, the courtyards and the islands: this is the marginalized city, tolerated because indispensable to its development, the city that the regime could not disperse, due to the scarce means available and by the objective of the programs: construction of small units of peripheral housing, of fascist regulation and control.

In these units, and by the hard experience of living in them, it aroused the movement claiming the right to housing and the city. This movement gained dimension and influence by communicating to the populations of the degraded areas of the historic center and surroundings; and to this, contributed ties of the old neighborhood, strengthened when punctually cut.

2. The latent crisis of contemporary architecture and the city, which the European development of the years 1950-60, and with it the myth of invention and unconvinced optimism, failed to conceal, in the face of small but prestigious reactions, found in Portugal, after the 25th of April, the climate of leap, analysis, openness, experience, transformation, responsiveness and proposal that had been lacking until then. On a large scale and in short instant.

Different reactions, difficult to adjust, were born from the encounter with popular architecture – not the traditional, anonymous, and wisely adapted to a geographical and social environment of slow transformation, but the one resulting from the violent post-war rupture, late but equally intense among us, of need, of revolt and the age-old desire for beauty and comfort. The sudden revelation of painfully beautiful or awkwardly copied fragments, in contrast to the grey and distant professional practice, explain in Portugal the sudden alignment with European trends, triggered by slower and tried pathways, which translate:

- a) In a critique of the use of disciplinary patrimony, considered purist and elitist in its "modern" practice, and in the hasty search for a lost spontaneity, in rare or non-existent real terms (and this tendency proclaims itself of the playful values of architecture, also of history, almost always seen as neutral deposit of forms);
- b) In a descent into the roots of the Modern Movement, naturally endless, and therefore limited to some lower risk references.

In both cases, an inability (which coincides with a generalized invitation, when not imposed) to dive inside the movements and transformation of the city, outside at decision levels where direct participation rarely happens, or only late, or with poor information; and that consequently overlap them, being determinant in Portugal, as is visible.

A perhaps inevitable disability.

A participation process moves between conflicts, tensions, shocks, commitment, jumps, interruptions; it understands mistakes and their criticism; it accumulates experience; tends to the overall.

It has little to do with the appeasing night of bureaucracy that it has become, a little everywhere where it still exists or already exists, or with the process of fragmentation of the city in pockets of preservation, participation, quality, permissiveness.

It has little to do with trends in internal circuit architecture, and with its different combinations and doses.

Moments of a creative process of participation took place in Portugal, after the 25th of April. And that was the only moment of significant international interest in Portuguese architecture, at least to my knowledge, and in contemporaneity.

I do not think it is distorting reality by stating that this creative period participated, of the exteriorization of the hidden city, in a journey from the poor house to the Plan, with almost no follow-up, and that it privileges again the docile and delayed import of models, including the masked of irreverence.

3. This is the condition in which the architect works, responsible for 3% of what is built in Portugal, of approximately 10% in the city of Oporto.

Under this condition, the architect cannot act (participate) imitating the spontaneity he does not have, nor closing in on a supposedly erudite production, when the transformation of architecture and the city has always been based on the intersection, misceage, innovation and continuity, seeking to respond to the problems of everyday life and eagerness for adventure.

Architecture derives its legitimacy, as discipline and as language, from attention and intuition.

Nowadays, architecture of the 3% can only be radical, it can seem nothing but distanced.

From the rigor of the architect, can only result demarcation of the chaotic and stimulating clandestine transformation.

In this transformation one must lose or find, for rigor understands his observation, indignant and amazed, even to spontaneous permeability.

I feel lie ending by paraphrasing Vargas Llosa when he speaks about literature: architecture will disappear when humanity is happy.

Until then, responsibility remains.

Porto, 7th of December 1984.