

FERRÃO, João – People, houses and cities: the trilogy of an architect-citizen

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Abstract

The influence of Nuno Teotónio Pereira in the concept and building criteria of the so-called social housing was decisive, mainly in those who worked with him or contacted him rather than through his writings or presentations in academic meetings. There was one Nuno (Portas) who was an urban, restless, a compulsive reader, excellent at critical, multidisciplinary thinking, almost not an architect, there was another Nuno (Teotónio Pereira), always a citizen-architect, discreet but assertive in his opinions and advice, loyal to the Modernist principles, worried about ensuring good architecture to all the Portuguese and in fighting any type of urban social segregation.

Keywords: Nuno Teotónio Pereira, city, people, office-school, architect-citizen.

Full Paper

I met Nuno Teotónio Pereira late in his life. I was never part of any of his groups, either as a citizen or as an architect: the world of social housing, the so-called progressive Catholics, his school-like-office, the left-wing group (Movimento da Esquerda Socialista (MES)), just to give a few examples. I knew him, of course, as a public figure, an activist against the Portuguese colonial war and the Portuguese political regime, Estado Novo, advocate of good housing for everyone, political prisoner released from Caxias prison after the 1974 revolution. I also knew his work, from the iconic buildings to his most recent work within the municipal plan, Polis, of the city of Covilhã. We had mutual friends, such as Nuno Portas, and some direct links, some distant in time (the school “Os Castores”, run by Ivone Leal during the 1960s and where his children studied and one of my sister taught music), other more recent and more tenuous (CIDAC, for example).

Since Nuno Teotónio Pereira and Nuno Portas had been friends for decades and had shared numerous initiatives and experiences, it is interesting to understand why I seem to have known the latter so well and for so long and I only contacted the former so much later. The main reason is rather simple: from a certain point onwards, Nuno Teotónio Pereira’s office was the core of his life and influence, whereas Nuno Portas’s influence spread through LNEC, the university, the many conferences, lectures and seminars he participated in and placed him in contact with different scientific and professional areas.

Nuno Teotónio Pereira collaborated in the survey on popular architecture - Inquérito à Arquitectura Popular em Portugal (Area 4 – Estremadura), was a consultant and architect in the field of social housing, designed neighbourhoods for low and medium income populations. However, unlike Portas, his activity did not lead him to create links with other scientific areas such as sociology, geography or landscaping, or to get actively involved with any professional association of urban planners. He was always an architect, an architect-citizen with a humanistic, social and urban planning perspective, but first and foremost an architect.

The influence of Nuno Teotónio Pereira on the concept and building criteria of the so-called social housing was decisive, mainly in those who worked with him or contacted him rather than through his writings or presentations in academic meetings. There was one Nuno (Portas) who was an urban, restless, a

compulsive reader, excellent at critical, multidisciplinary thinking, almost not an architect, there was another Nuno (Teotónio Pereira), always a citizen-architect, discreet but assertive in his opinions and advice, loyal to the Modernist principles, worried about ensuring good architecture to all the Portuguese and in fighting any type of urban social segregation.

Already in this century, in 2006, I had the pleasure of meeting Nuno Teotónio Pereira. I was then Secretary of State for Territory Planning and Cities (2005-2009) and he was a member of the Consulting Committee of the Instituto da Habitação e da Reabilitação Urbana (IHRU) and member of the Editorial Committee of a magazine, Revista Monumentos, a well-reputed publication, to whose name had been added the subtitle “Cidade, Património e Reabilitação Urbana” (City, Heritage and Urban Regeneration), so as to give it a wider scope. His participation in both committees was not my choice but rather a result of a proposal by Nuno Vasconcelos, then President of IHRU. Yet, I immediately agreed with both proposals.

Our somewhat irregular but rather enriching relationship started at that moment. I was aware of the calm, wise and convincing interventions by Nuno Teotónio Pereira in both Committees, of his opinions and advice, his influence in the decisions on several matters under discussion, in particular on “socially accessible” housing and on regeneration of urban and peri-urban areas.

We met and spoke several times within the scope of these meetings. What we discussed is rather obvious: how to design efficient and solid housing, regeneration and urban planning policies, not from an abstract theoretical perspective but based on successful case studies, interesting but never implemented solutions or failed well-intentioned initiatives. We discussed everything: from action paradigms (how can a policy of social housing become a social policy of housing?), to which tools should be used (from Integrated Plans within the plan - III Plano de Fomento / 1968-73 - to the Polis Program or to the recently founded initiative - Iniciativa Bairros Críticos).

I recall those conversations and Nuno Teotónio Pereira's wisdom and experience. His deafness demanded that we talked very close, emphasizing the intimacy and even tenderness of our exchange - between one who had no formal power but led the conversation and made proposals and one who was in government but needed to learn.

My leaving office and his blindness, partial at first and gradually total blindness, made our meetings less regular. However, in the ones we had, our topics

remained the same: the people and the city, the city for the people. We never discussed architecture. And we talked less and less about architecture with a social focus as an independent topic. People, houses and the city became conversations between two individuals about decent and dignified living. Though the individuals continued to not know one another well, they shared a fascination for the city as a civilizational element, in this case symbolized by “his” neighbourhood, Bairro de Alvalade.

Nuno Teotónio Pereira received the award Prémio Universidade de Lisboa 2015. His friend Nuno Portas made a speech in his honour. Nuno Teotónio Pereira was too frail to accept the award in person. His friend Nuno Portas gave a very emotional speech. Those present at the ceremony, held at Reitoria da Universidade de Lisboa, witnessed a unique moment: that of the (spiritual rather than physical) meeting of two geniuses - the architect-citizen and the territory architect - who are part of the history of architecture and urban planning in Portugal and for whom the urban areas (the built city) were viewed as a reflection of the civitas (society and its values) and of the polis (politics) rather than the opposite.

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