

The “anti-praça” of Portugal – Themes and reflections

José Manuel Fernandes

Born in Lisbon, Portugal, in 1953. Licensed Architect from the school of Fine Arts of Lisbon in 1977. Ph.D. (1993) and Professor (2010) in the history of architecture and urbanism from the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Lisbon. Member of the editorial board of the journal *Monumentos* since 1994 (32 editions edited and 33 edited digitally 10/2013). Guest lecturer at the Department of Architecture at the Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa since 2003, and its Director from 1998 to 2000. Director of the Institute of Contemporary Art of the Ministry of Culture of Portugal (2001-2003). He researches, writes and publishes regularly on Architectural History and Urbanism (publishes scientific articles since 1978 and research books since 1989). Iberian DOCOMOMO's first President, as a representative of the Association of Portuguese Architects (1993-97), lecturer and proponent in the Iberian DOCOMOMO Conference between 1997 and 2013.

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Abstract

Acquired through the formation of its own characteristics, the Portuguese origin of urban and architectural culture is unique in many aspects, one of these being the appropriation of the concept of the “*praça*”, or square, a mode that essentially rejected its central role in the process of space and urban form, interested instead in the numerous “lateral” variants of this theme. This Lusitanian culture opted for the “street” and various linear systems in general, above the “*praça*” – its perception, understanding and cultural proposal for central urban spaces being essentially intimate, organic, dynamic, adaptive and contemplative.

Some concepts of binary opposition in the process of the geo-historical formation of Portuguese cities are referred to, such as intimacy/extroversion, organic/geometric, adaptive/foundational, dynamic/static and contemplative/transformative. Geo-historical roots of some idiosyncrasies of Portuguese cities are addressed. A temperament of individualism, a collective attitude of reserve and introversion are indicated, which translates into the mode, design, and use of urban space. For the Portuguese city, its vernacular dimensions are a vocation of nostalgia for the rural and value given to the *quintal* and *terreiro/largo* against the courtyard and the *praça*.

The theme of the “*praça* as incomplete space” or misunderstood space is addressed. In Portugal, the *praça* tends to be incomplete, irregular, asymmetrical, tending toward urban spatial fluidity rather than conceptual autonomy. The “syndrome of the failed arcades”, i.e. a *praça* with lack of surrounding arcades (porticos, galleries), is illustrated, a theme that is the rule in the Portuguese city.

Keywords: Praça, Portuguese City, Public Space.

“*Praça*’, from the Latin *platea* is a **large public place** usually surrounded by buildings for beautification of a city, town or village, and are a means of hygiene for better air circulation as well as for **planting** of trees” in Silva António de Morais’ *Grande Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa*, 10th. Edition, Confluência Editorial, Lisbon, 1955, vol. VIII, pp. 583-584.

Premises, framing of a look

This text seeks to reflect on various topics and assumptions, namely:

1- The Portuguese origin of urban and architectural culture acquired throughout the formation of its own unique characteristics in many aspects, one being the specific mode of appropriation of the concept of the “*praça*” as it was proposed and developed from Greco-Roman classical culture and then through the formation of European culture.

2- The Lusitanian root culture. While proposing numerous and rich practical solutions for the “*praça*”, the mode essentially rejected its central role in the process of space and urban form, interested instead in the many “lateral” variants of this theme like the “*rossio*” (component of rural-urban linkage), the “*largo*” (component of relationship with the wide “street”), the “*terreiro*” (more informal component), the “churchyard” (sacralised component), among others, making, in this way, peripheral, complementary and heterodox squares, the essence of the Portuguese city.

3-Lusitanian culture encouraged the “street” and various systems of linear roads in general above the “*praça*” in a context of perceptions and of understanding and proposed central urban spaces as being essentially intimate, organic, dynamic, adaptive and contemplative. However, this culture “of the street” was built *against* the idea of spaces being more extroverted collective expression (the *praça*), or more geometric content (eventually leading to monumentalised and/or authoritarian dimensions), or more planned and “vertical” (in a static sense of the definition of a central axis) or a more transformative, idealised and Platonic vocation.

The following theoretical development must be understood in the context of certain characteristics and deepest vocations of being collective, so that one can act in the intervention and/or design of current spaces within the culture of Portuguese influence, with full knowledge of its roots, meanings and potential.

In Portugal or in another territory, the universality of urban experience rooted in the Western world has not been rejected, being advocated since the last millennium, which of course includes the “*praça*”. But it is understood that this plural and encompassing dimension becomes more certain, and best applies, if all the nuances of the various internal and localised cultures of the Western world (Euro-American) are contemplated. As is the case with Portuguese urban-architectural culture, the individual allows themselves to achieve the universal.

Some concepts of binary opposition in the process of the geo-historical formation of the Portuguese city

The dialectical opposition's intimacy/extroversion, organic/geometric, adaptive/foundational, dynamic/static and contemplative/transformative can be understood in an analysis and characterisation of Portuguese cities throughout the successive aspects of their historical formation.

As the Portuguese territory became consolidated geographically and historically, the "city landscape" that the metropolis within this southern-European culture gained was pronounced. That is, its main urban spaces, so incremented and designed, sought above all proximity to sites with greater geo-morphological complexity, naturally conducive to a high aesthetic vocation, such as the rivers, valleys, hills and slopes, joined to its Atlantic coastal front.

These spaces, in addition to the functional and socio-economic necessities, allow the idea of "enjoyment of a natural environment transformed" to be cherished. With a little of the ancient Greek style, the late medieval Portuguese city valued the installation, design and general expression of each place, seeking not to impose oneself on this visual, spatial "working" that formally acts in conjunction with all characteristics offered by nature (salient reliefs, ramps, water fronts, borders, bays, etc.)

Secondly, this mode of appropriation of places was being perfected in a culture of the late Middle Ages (14th to 15th centuries), when Portugal established its current Iberian borders and started its Atlantic expansion. They rested their understanding of the world on assumptions of the dominant philosophy in medieval time, realism. The philosophy explained the world in a non-interventional anti-idealised way that passively accepted reality as anti-transformative: God had made the world, man fits into it, accepts it and understands it the best he possibly can. Enjoying it in contemplation, if we want to experience it, rather than modify it: "the general exists only in the sensorially perceptive singular, and can only be met through the singular; it is a condition of all common knowledge, the inductive generalisation, which cannot be realised without the perception of the senses" (in *Dicionário Filosófico* / vol.ABC, dir. M.M.Rosental and P.F. Iudin, Lisbon, 1972, p.56).

This specific understanding of geo-physical and territorial matter occupied by communities in successive landscape spaces, conformed in a clear and balanced manner with the choice of a certain type of site (rich in materials, natural shapes and volumes), boosting the beautiful and serene inhabitant-landscape relationship, allowing the occupation of those places in a discreet and integrated manner and looking to "draw" every city from the gradual occupation that follows the principle lines offered to the occupant and the planner. We can say that they knew how to pragmatically use a "distorted geometry" suited and shaped by each orographic accident for each line of waterline or hill, in a vision we call realism of space (anti-idealised, not intending to "transform"), an "organic" vision, if you will. However, this is a "trapped" word, for "organic" includes understanding and designing sites, as well as the planning and rationalising spaces, be it in a more integrated and less rigid way than that of pre-conceived reticulated pattern design plans.

The construction of streets in this type of city assumed its exponent in the Rua Direita, which was designated in order to layout the street, crossing the metropolis from one side to another (connecting eventually the doors of its walls), articulating point 1 "directly" with point 2 (e.g., Rua Direita of Santa Catarina to São Bento). This structuring street, connected to the various central points of the city, crossing the most important sites between straights and curves via "specialised enlargements", such as the Câmara or the Misericórdia largos, the *terreiros* of the palace, the *rossios* (of the Portas de Santo Antão in Lisbon), the churchyards (of Sé Cathedral and other churches), until the *praças* in the most current sense.

All this was fluid, dynamic and unstoppable, creating a kind of "distributive equilibrium" between the various key functions of the city. This is because each of these functions occupied its own place, laying down and opening a public space, characterised as independently and strategically removed from the next. This and the typically medieval mode (which always sought to balance spaces "between powers") was persistent and incorporated into the Lusitanian city. The municipal public space had its specific domain independent from Sé Cathedral, from Misericórdia, from the king domains and from the convents. It should be noted, moreover, that the tradition of a "weak" central power remained, which characterised the secular action of the Portuguese Crown (then of the Republic) and the Portuguese-euro-colonial political power, even to the present day.

This spatial organisation of the metropolis in "linear sequences of streets" linked to each other in a fluid and adaptive way, favoured sensitive livability and the dynamic of the city, helping to build its most important theme. Man, walking through the town, experienced the way through which its users could "make it" and so "inhabit it", work, have fun and in short, live. This, again, is an understanding of space and material with a medieval-Aristotelian base, where "... all of nature is conceived under consecutive transformations of "material" into "form" and vice versa [Aristotle] ... though the matter only as a passive principle, and attributed all activity to the form, and reduced to form the principles of movement and purpose. The last source of all movement...is God" (in *Dicionário Filosófico*/vol.ABC, dir.M.M.Rosental e P.F.ludin, Lisboa, 1972, pp.56-57). This dynamic sensorial process was obtained like this, through simply walking down Rua Direita, so implying, in this entry-exit in the main series of *largos-terreiros-rossios-churchyards*, which precisely avoid being overly formalised and independent from the streets they cross and generate as a way to ensure its cohesion and solidarity body, and propitiate a "livability" in all of the city.

We talk about the origin of the Portuguese city "street", extending the theme of the Rua Direita to the more general concept of "street". It is noted that we speak of this street and this metropolis not only in the European Portugal and the Atlantic islands, but above all in other territories where they are placed in this kind of civic-urban-space acculturation, in America, Asia, Africa and Oceania, from Rio de Janeiro to Luanda, from Goa to Macau, from Bahia to Lourenço Marques and from São Tomé to Dili. The "street" was assumed well in these cities, constituting its own "refuge" – taken from an intrinsically embarrassed, shy and introverted community feeling and attitude, which always preferred the discrete street-channels against the open, exposed *praça* (always in contrast with the "*plazas*" of Spain or the "*places*" of France). The street in the Lusitanian urban square is a place of movement, unattached, discreet, and fluid, where we feel good, overcoming collectively the difficulty of using the *praça* "open to all", where everyone sees each other and *must* communicate fully and openly with each other.

Geo-historical roots of an idiosyncrasy

Of course, the great geo-historical weight of urban roots in the Portuguese territory can explain all this in large part. It has always favoured the fixation, rooting and persistence of "peoples and cultures of the periphery" over euro-centralist cultures. This happened since the Castrensian cultures (resistant towering villages and hillsides of Prehistory and the Iron Age, with irregular meshes and a ruralised dimension) to the Phoenician-Greek (the first occupants of the Lusitanian coast, with their ports and piers) and barbarian and Islamic (restorers of the Roman heritage in the countryside and the heart of the territory, with the Visigoths, Suevians and the Maghreb Arabs and their anti-geometric and inorganic cities). All of them were going through the successive stages of the long historical process of the formation of identity space of the constructed Portuguese culture. This is against the idea of Romanisation, with its rationalist structuring of space and mesh of settlements. The work of the geographer Orlando Ribeiro and his followers determined the weight of oriental, ruralised and ancient cultures in the construction of the Portuguese city.

A temperament of individualism, a collective attitude of introversion and reserve

To understand the internal structure of the origin of Portuguese cities and to better clarify the role of the "*praça*", now with the help of the Islamic tradition, we take as an example or theme the idea of "*barrio*" or neighbourhood "from the Arabic *barri*...each of the main parts of a city, part of a settlement," (in *Dicionário Prático Ilustrado*, ed. Lello & Irmãos – Editores, Porto, 1976, p.136).

The Lusitanian city, despite its clear generic subscription to the civic-public city model essentially of classic-European roots (see Chueca Goitia *Breve História do Urbanismo*) is in this context a specific variant, well-defined in its peripheral and idiosyncratic character. Thus, the concept of "*bairro*" in the origin of the Portuguese city (i.e. a "part", assumed as a portion, something independent) tended to historically reach an important and strong dimension, which frequently overcame the themes of the "collective dimension" and "public good". It is associated and based on the theme of a group-entrenched individualism, whose origin can be found in half-millennial Muslim influence.

The *Bairro*, "the land of each one" and individualiser of its inhabitants, was and still is constructed (see the "*marchas populares*" of Lisbon), as a flag for representation in several superior plans, or at least in tension/contrast, with the involvement of this local community in terms of considering the value and the notion of the city where it inscribes as a whole. Now, in this context, the role of the *praça* as a centralising, unifying body, emanating, natural and "geometrically", the sense of a central power that is ideal and abstract, that everyone should abide by - it weakens and tends to fade, being replaced by the "streets of the *bairros*", structuring components (although something fragmented and dissociative) of the urban whole.

The vernacular dimension as a vocation: from the rural and the *quintal* to the courtyard and *praça*.

In the framework that we tried to define, another "typological species" is explained, which is a further characterising element that could be called "ruralist nostalgia". Now in the specific framework of each house of each one, the habitat of each family - determines the preferred theme of "*quintal*" linked to housing, rather than the use of the "courtyard", which will otherwise be in the same proportion of the preferred understanding "*largo/terreiro/rossio*" instead of the "*praca*". In fact, one and the other, "*quintal* and *largo*" are more informal concepts and closer to nature, while the "courtyard and *praça*" are more rigid, geometric concessions of a more urban form.

Thus, the *quintal*, complementary but an essential part of this "urban Portuguese house" for historical formation, presents a spatial-functional and introverted expression that favours solitude and discretion (with its walls and roofs), while ensuring a lost connection (but felt with a "longing or yearning") from the city to the rural world. It incorporates land, has cultivation, can support vegetable gardens or an orchard. While the geometric place of excellence, the courtyard, normally a centre point and/or core of the house is paved, has decorative elements in stone or pottery and excludes vegetables but as ornaments. With the due distances, scale and relationship with the city, the "*quintal*" is for the "*terreiro*" or "*rossio*" what the "courtyard" is for the "*praça*". And here we have another clear aspect of this theme of urban "preferences".

This question of conceptual oppositions between the *quintal* and courtyard is linked also to the vernacular dimension of the origin of the Portuguese city, against the assertion of the classical universe, which dominates in other more central European cities, the Portuguese city is an example of the material culture of European peripheries, it defends and advocates the assumption of the construction of popular character, the so-called "current architecture" with its specific regional features, which reaches a higher aesthetic value only or primarily as a whole – contrary to the tendency of classical architecture to erect monuments. Now monumentality (with its attached themes, symmetry, scale, repetition, equilibrium) is one of the attributes that constitute a vital part of the formal constitution of the *praça*, and whose classical feature reinforces its key role for space, being centralised and powerful.

The "praça as incomplete space", or "misunderstood" space, in Portugal

It is easier to prove examples of "non-*praça*" or "incomplete" *praça*, than the systematic seriation of many examples available of "crypto-*praça*" in Portugal (see the work *A Praça em Portugal / Inventário do Espaço Público*, FAUTL, coord. Jose Lamas/Carlos Dias Coelho, Lisbon, 2007). Let us turn, analytically, only on the characteristics of our "*praça* of *praças*", the most exemplary and sophisticated of many urban cultures of Portuguese origin produced: Praça do Comércio in Lisbon (before the earthquake of 1755, it was called Terreiro do Paço), designed to rebuild Pombaline in the second half of the 18th century. In it we appreciate precisely the aspects that, affirming their structural, functional and stylistic incompleteness, ensure and prove the "difficulty" (i.e. the quality) of the urban Lusitanian culture appropriating the global concept of the "*praça*", in this case, a classical expression as understood in major centres of European classical design.

In fact, in a simple statistical inquiry, the scholar easily realises that the "Portuguese *praça*" is in its historical formulation (Medieval to contemporary time) geographical (in Lusitanian cities from Europe to Asia, America and Africa) and typological (failure of basic elements such as porticos, an enclosed dimension, formal and spatially autonomous), tending to be incomplete, irregular and asymmetrical, with a view to its dilution in urban spatial fluidity, instead of its own conceptual autonomy.

Let us recall, in this regard, the theme clearly expressed in our cities, which we call the "failed arcades syndrome", that is the absence as a rule of the *praça* with arcades (porticos, galleries) all the way around, within the Lusitanian origin of urban-architectural culture, over the different and successive historical periods, from the medieval Lisbonian *Rossio* to the Portian *Praça da Ribeira* (1700s), the *Praça do Giraldo* in Évora (the work typical of the *Estado Novo* regime in 20th century) to *Praça do Areeiro* in Lisbon. In all of them, as in almost all of the Lusitanian *praças*, there is what can be called "meagre arcades", i.e. "shy" and "weak" attempts to structure the elevations of these *praça* with galleries, sometimes just established on one side of the *praça* or, in many other cases, the absence of any arcade or ground floor gallery all around.

This clear sign of "incompleteness by rule" is unequivocal proof of the theme of the arcade-gallery, enhanced and stabilised since the Roman forum, reaffirmed civically in the medieval and European classical *praças*, and from the spatial support that is essential as a guarantor of the public-private, interior–exterior interface and the leaked base, supports the full body of the building in the ground floor. In Portuguese urban cultural it is decried, demoted and deleted for all the reasons and causes referred to in this text, whether for the intimate collective attitude of introversion; or its spatial posture of strong individualism (which "flees" from the implication of public use predominance of the arcade-gallery); or to be aware of the more utilitarian, vernacular and reinventive sense of the urban space of a Lusitanian root, which simplifying the *praças* (devoid of arcades/porticos) and chooses to elect the streets and the more irregular and informal public spaces as its favourite themes and preferred usage pattern.

Praça do Comércio is arguably the largest example of this and the urban cultural assumption of the "incomplete *praça*". Not coincidentally, 250 years after its creation it, is still popularly known in Portugal by the name prior to its construction (from the space destroyed by the earthquake of 1755) *Terreiro do Paço*, a vernacularly toponymic choice that proves the options of taste, of building, of knowledge and of Portuguese culture. It is unequivocally a classic *praça*, but is perceived and integrated as a *terreiro* (that was but is no longer).

We move on to analyse its formal and spatial structure, a quick and clear verification of incompleteness:

-It displays only three sides open with what would be the fourth over the river (the sea or river in Portuguese cities, in the tradition of public open space). In the 18th century, there was a reconstruction project for the *praça*, with four sides (and with open arcades onto the river), but it was rejected, certainly not by chance;

-It displays in its stylistic and formal composition a clear concern for simplicity. Despite obvious design elegance, the use of colossal pilasters only on the façade angles, which explains the clear assumption of the traditional vernacular styles of Portuguese

architecture (and the recovery of the 17th century "Plain Style"), here crossed with a classical theme for strong symbolic necessity (of real power);

-Finally, the most interesting aspect of their incompleteness is their "invisible character". Praça do Comércio was never "practiced", inhabited, lived, fully integrated by the community that created it. The arcades, which are of exceptional generosity (especially if we consider the other arcades of Lusitanian cities), remain nearly empty of people (compare with the current Rossio of Lisbon, which is popular, but has no arcades); however, perhaps poetically, roaming ghost-like and nocturnal, destined for these arcades, is poet Fernando Pessoa and his dreams.

Note: the definition of "*praça*" in Silva, António de Moraes, *Grande Dicionário da Língua Portuguesa*, 10th Edition, Editorial Confluência, Lisbon, 1955, vol. VIII, pp. 583-584 "(from the Latin *platea* – **large public place**, usually surrounded by **buildings** for beautification of a town, village, etc., and has the purpose of better air circulation for hygiene and for the **planting** of trees; **rossio** –".

It is curious to see how the definition of "Praça" as a Portuguese word tries to "reduce" to it the concept of *largo* or "rossio", and it therefore incorporates nature (tree planting), sanitary (hygienic) and aesthetic (embellishment) objectives. See similar other definitions with the same basis in the *Dicionário Prático Ilustrado* (ed. Lello & Irmãos – Editores, Porto, 1976, p.941), which refers to "the Greek place, latin. *Platea*. Public place, discovered and usually surrounded by buildings."; and, finally, see Cunha, Antonio Geraldo, *Dicionário Etimológico Nova Fronteira da Língua Portuguesa*, 2nd Edition, Rio de Janeiro, 1986, p. 627, where a "public place surrounded by buildings, *largo*..." is mentioned with the word "*praza*" in the medieval period.

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