

AA FRONT MEMBERS' ROOM
12 NOVEMBER TO 7 DECEMBER 2004

EMERGENT ARCHITECTURAL SCENE:
A.S.* (CÉLIA GOMES, PEDRO MACHADO COSTA)
AUZ (JORGE LAPA, JOSÉ MACEDO, PEDRO SANTOS)
PEDRO MAURÍCIO BORGES

TRACING PORTUGAL

Continuity and Rupture
The following extract from an interview between Álvaro Siza Vieira and Gonçalo Furtado, one of the curators of the 'Tracing Portugal' exhibition, offers an introduction to Portugal's contemporary architecture and the influences that have shaped it.

GF I'd like to talk about Portuguese architecture and the context of your work, as well as the work of younger generations. I suggest the theme of 'continuity and rupture', because the history of architecture has evolved out of this dialectic. The modernist architecture that we have arose in a particular cultural and political context. Some of its practitioners were active until recently, such as Fernando Távora in Oporto.

AS Távora is a distinctive architect who influenced this country's architecture in two respects: through his wide and sensitive learning, and through the fertile development his work underwent, taking modernism in new directions. When he joined the Faculty of Oporto in the 1950s it was already under the sway of Le Corbusier, and directed by Carlos Ramos, who was well aware of the benefits of encouraging young talent.

Later on, with the relaxation of political controls, there was greater access to information and more opportunities to travel, to be exposed to other influences (whether Neorationalism or the works of Frank Lloyd Wright or Alvar Aalto). Modernism was under revision, as was Portuguese culture in general. The academies went through a period of struggle that resulted in prison sentences both literal and metaphorical – in the sense of being marginalised by the establishment or one's colleagues. But after the Revolution of 25 April 1974 architecture moved closer to the people.

GF There were numerous factors conditioning that process of evolution of modernism, both internal and external, for example Brazilian modernism, or the work of Alvar Aalto, which could be seen in magazines.

AS These influences operated primarily through affinity. The Brazilian influence in the 1950s can be understood in terms of the cultural links between the two countries. The interest in Aalto and in Finland has to do with both countries being on the periphery, and both having a living tradition of folk culture.

GF Did Távora's 'third way', recognising the limits of modernism and adapting it, find echoes in your work?

AS Our trajectories and concerns are different. At first Távora produced modernist works that were rejected by government ministers. The real turning point for him came with a small project, the house in Ofir. I was working with him at the time. We worked together on the

AS When I started to work in Matosinhos, near Oporto, in 1953-54, architects were in the minority, which led to conflict with the engineers, who saw us as surplus to requirements. The great difference after the revolution in 1974 was the decentralisation of practice away from Lisbon and Oporto.

The dependency of architecture on the mechanisms of power had always been a fact of life in this country, but today it has increased, becoming painful at times.

Municipal councils serve a four-year term, and if they are voted out of office the first act of the new council is generally to cut the projects begun or planned by their predecessors. This goes a long way towards explaining the low quality of public architecture. But more serious even than these problems with architecture (which can still be overcome by the efforts of younger generations), is the widespread destruction of the landscape. What's the point of a fine work of architecture if it's set in a degraded landscape? I think this is an aspect that is not taken seriously enough, on account of a lack of political vision.

GF There is one view that what people want of architecture is the signature of an 'author', and yet projects that are contingent on political approval tend to become amorphous, mutilating in the service of whoever is in power.

AS I see people repeating the same project, with a simple make-over according to the administration of the day. Ethics are going through a bad time at the moment.

GF Reflecting on this exhibition, we have tried, through our selection of work, to identify the coexistence of the 'continuities and ruptures' that make up the dialectic of architecture as an institution. For example, in the houses designed by Pedro Manuel Borges we can see many things that are conventional aspects of Portuguese practice, but also a certain freedom and playfulness in their application: the front part doesn't have anything to do with the back, traditional elements such as the patio are altered, diluting his stamp on the work. And the design is shared with the client in an impressively humble fashion.

The architects in the show have different frameworks of reference, although in our small country they end up being grouped together. While Borges, who recently won the important Secil Prize, appropriates references in terms of continuity, the a.s.* group from Lisbon incorporates the experiences they have gained abroad into their successful competition proposals.

AUZ, in turn, appears as an ironic and opportunistic counterpoint to the current 'medialisation' of the profession.

The newest generation is defined by information and mobility, but there are times when its relation to culture seems to be merely media-driven. The profession seems to be shedding its political

AS Everything has relaxed, and it is no longer necessary to take an extreme political stand. There is more information, and more contact with outside architects. Think of the implications of something like the Erasmus programme, for example. At the same time there is an increasing specialisation in architectural practice, and it is often difficult to get the specialists to relate to each other. I often think about the need to set up a more open dialogue, to break away from that terrible spirit of specialisation.

But returning to the theme of continuity, such a thing takes time to achieve. And these days everything is subject to the vertigo of the new. There is less and less acceptance of the importance of time.

GF I remember some years back there was a rumour that you were going to withdraw from the fray in order to pursue your dream of becoming a sculptor. Would that be a less frantic activity?

AS I do have a need to find an outlet in the design of objects. It's a way of countering the wear and tear of the profession. These objects are demanding to design, but they can be completed, observed, confirmed and critiqued in a short space of time. It's a type of liberation, almost a therapy. By contrast, it's not unusual for a building to take 10 years to complete, because of the difficulties in getting projects approved, financial constraints, and so on.

GF In the terms of this profession, and the time it takes to train, the architects in the exhibition are all very young. After the dedication of a lifetime and the renown it has conferred on you, what do you think architecture is good for, why do we do it?

AS In principle, we do it so that people can live better. An interest in building is part of human nature, as well as something we need, and naturally this interest is more concentrated in some people than in others. It may be, however, that every architect secretly wishes that architecture weren't necessary. We've talked of

authorship, but many people don't seem to understand that it does not necessarily involve innovation. I remember that my plan for the Chiado (in Lisbon), which conceived of the historic centre as an architectural whole, was attacked as a pastiche. But you shouldn't let me finish like that. No. I like the idea that architects might secretly wish that architecture didn't have to exist.