

# TO AND FRO: MODERNISM AND VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

EDITED BY  
JOANA CUNHA LEAL  
MARIA HELENA MAIA  
ALEXANDRA CARDOSO

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**Editors**

Joana Cunha Leal, Maria Helena Maia and Alexandra Cardoso

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Centro de Estudos Arnaldo Araújo  
Escola Superior Artística do Porto  
Largo de S. Domingos, 80  
4050-545 PORTO, PORTUGAL  
Telef: 223392130; Fax: 223392139  
e-mail: ceaa@esap.pt  
www.ceaa.pt

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# A CRITICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE PORTUGUESE SURVEY IN THE EARLY SIXTIES: NUNO PORTAS AND PEDRO VIEIRA DE ALMEIDA

TIAGO LOPES DIAS

## I.

In the late fifties, the renewed magazine *Arquitectura* was run by a young generation of architects committed to disquiet their peaceful, apathetic and uncritical professional milieu. By the time the Survey on Popular Architecture in Portugal was published, in 1961, *Arquitectura* had already made the call for debate on the results of its fieldwork, concluded some years earlier. In 1959, the magazine published two extensive articles, signed by António Freitas, member of one of the six teams that went through the continental territory, and Carlos Duarte, from the editorial board. Both articles, illustrated with photographs taken during the fieldwork, shared a similar concern: the time spent since the beginning of the works (1955) was postponing a necessary discussion, which a responsible professional class could not avoid.

The more openly positive spirit set out in a previous editorial, which considered the Survey one of the three most important events of the post-1948 congress<sup>1</sup>, gave place to a deeper and calmer argumentation. The main guidelines from “Traditionalism and evolution” and “Notes on spontaneous architecture”

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to the First National Congress of Architecture held in Lisbon between May 28 and June 4, 1948.

stressed a contradiction: could all the information gathered in the fieldwork be presented as an opportunity to overcome the impasse with which Portuguese architects were struggling during the fifties, beyond aesthetic questions? Could all the attention directed to spontaneous forms of territorial organization be valued without compromising the development of a largely rural country that had barely begun its industrialization?

By 1959, Nuno Portas and Pedro Vieira de Almeida were finishing their degree in architecture. Both were working, along with António Freitas, in the same studio in Lisbon led by Nuno Teotónio Pereira, an experienced architect who was Freitas' team leader in the Survey. The *Rua da Alegria's* studio would prove to be, by then, a particularly active center of debate (which was something absent from Beaux-Arts universities) concerned with the real possibilities of a modern architecture in Portugal. Portas and Vieira de Almeida would deepen some questions introduced in the above-mentioned texts, being clear that the awareness of an implicit dilemma explains why both refer to the Survey as extremely useful yet extremely dangerous material.

## II.

Nuno Portas, one of the chief contributors in the early years of the magazine *Arquitectura*, would be the first to deepen the questions advanced by his colleagues in non-specialized press, which meant opening the debate to a broader public. In 1963, he published two important essays in cultural magazines such as *O Tempo e o Modo*, headed by an anti-regime group of catholic intellectuals, or *Jornal de Letras e Artes*, a higher print run publication for which he had been writing the chronicles about the pioneers of Portuguese modernism. Even though these texts cannot be read as a specific critique to the Survey, we can trace in both a clear and pragmatic position on some of its key points.

The first of the articles, "Tradition, progress and reaction in regional urbanism", focuses on the problematic relations between traditional culture and the increasingly changing demands of progress. Taking as case study Alentejo, a land



Figure 1. Yards and terraces of a southern village in Algarve. (cover of magazine *Arquitectura*, nº66, 1959)

stuck for centuries where large-scale operations related with industries, real state or tourism have not taken place so far (avoiding either massive destruction of the vernacular or its scenographic preservation) Portas claims for the urgency of accurate planning, beyond speculative pressures.

New ways of life were, by then, asking for new spaces and new forms of territorial organization, adapted to new forms of mobility, leisure, tourism, and other kind of social phenomena. The nearby region of Algarve was already suffering the disastrous consequences of economic greed, with irreversible transformations of the natural landscape. On the other hand, and not very different from the rest of the Portuguese territory, the south was mostly agrarian and poor. One of the most difficult challenges for the architect or the urban planner was to face '*apathetic, inert population*' or, even worse, a '*conservative deep nostalgia*' atmosphere, hostile to any notion of progress. Facing such dilemma, Portas points out a third way:

*Take also in consideration the growing interest for a possible cultural*

*continuity –generated within post-war modern architecture movement– willing to understand and absorb the content of tradition into a methodology clearly facing social and technical widespread progress for modern society. Willingness that stands on the basis, for example, of the Survey on Popular Architecture in Portugal (...). (Portas, 1963: 2)*

A realistic approach (pondering the real needs of a specific community, using pragmatic working principles) is, notwithstanding, a greater responsibility for the planner, considering that he has to intervene patiently and pedagogically, through dialogue. To be realist, therefore, does not mean to be conformist: a realistic point of view would be required *‘whether for necessary transformations or possible permanences’* (1963: 2). It’s not enough to understand how a particular population lives, and to respond to its occasional requests. The architect or the urban planner must work with *‘the evolving needs of the population that will emerge’* (1963: 5), must foresee possibilities for a better society without utopian pretensions.

Even if Alentejo is rich in good examples of popular architecture, Portas considers important to distinguish between forms of spontaneous life and certain stereotypes, often nourished by the population itself. Stereotypes that, sometimes, have the illusory power to freeze the natural flow of time, when shaped in forms repeated ad *infinitum*; forms devoid of meaning, i.e., representing ways of life that don’t exist anymore (or never did or could exist in such context, and were “imported” by trends, envy, provincialism...).

One of the stereotypes most vulnerable to misunderstandings refers to the term “tradition”. Portas assumes that *‘the values of traditional culture are already affected in its stability’* (1963: 4). Mobility, popular culture – spread by newspapers, magazines, cinema or television – as well as new construction materials define an intermediate phase, *‘still unable to be marked by new perspectives’* (1963: 4). However, what seems to be important in his reasoning is the very sense of the word “stability”:



*It must be stressed that spaces (from landscape to urban environment, from architecture to decoration objects) are the result of an accumulation of secular contributions: from the popular effort to adapt to environment and its needs, on one hand; to the higher-level cultures successively imported through exceptional works also known as scholarly contributions, on the other. (Portas, 1963: 3)*

So, all this knowledge, transmitted from generation to generation, is not a set of pre-established conventions to follow, but a collective, complex and open-ended contribution that not only accepts but needs change. Tradition is not something immutable. That's why Portas sees no alarm in the present situation and recalls the example of the past that advises us to *'trust in the continuity of local architecture, capable of coexisting and dialoguing with local or foreign erudite artists'* (1963: 4). A capacity of dialogue that was clearly out of modern architecture's agenda, specially in the period between World Wars.

These ideas will be summarized in a complementary article published only a month later. The title, itself a question – *'integrated architecture?'* – anticipates the first lines, where Portas asks: if tradition is an intertwined relationship between the popular and the erudite; if it is also the acculturation or adaptation of scholarly contributions; if after all, *'the sources or reference points, could be different in their historical roots, but find themselves spatially juxtaposed'* (2005: 25) – how to distinguish the valid references to be taken into consideration from those that should be called into question?

This doubt is raised by Portas' concerns with a superficial recovery of a "regional" expression in recent works by a younger generation of architects – a trend that he had also observed some months earlier in an exhibition of student's work held at Porto's College of Fine Arts (ESBAP). Immediately recalls that the interest for "integration" started first as a way out for the exhaustion caused by the international style limiting and imposing vocabulary. Nevertheless, the interesting work that was being developed in the postwar, mainly in Italy or the

Nordic countries, less intellectual and closer from common experience, could be useful to the Portuguese context only as methodological approach.

When the Survey is published in 1961, coinciding with a general interest in those experiences, Portas understands the risk underlying its data, profusely and skillfully illustrated with hundreds of photographs. His apprehension goes to superficial interpretations that might convert the Survey's *'remarkable database'* into a *'dangerous "catalogue" full of recipes ready to be used, empowering 'a mistaken and regressive notion of tradition'* (2004: 26) – in which, due to the incantatory power of images belonging to an epoch irrevocably gone, the natural open process of accumulation and acculturation of contributions would be lost. A few years later, these issues would be explicit in a Portas' critique to a recent building for an automobile stand and garage in Coimbra, by José Pulido Valente and Luis Álvares Ribeiro. The noncritical use of references to popular architecture, mixed with an unfulfilled technological expression, has produced, in his opinion, a lack of overall coherence that couldn't be irresponsibly justified as a collage. One of the fundamental ideas implied in the concept of "integration" is the liberation of any preconceived formal system. In his opinion, this building was juxtaposing two different languages in a confusing eclecticism: in the main elevation, facing a major road, prevailed the scale, proportions and materials (roof tile) of an almost artisan architecture; in the opposite, with a much larger presence due to the natural slope of the site, an almost brutalist use of concrete and glass.

Considering the specificity of the program, Portas found awkward that a building designed for the automobile industry did not involve any research of technological innovation for the Portuguese context. Besides, the quintessential product of industrial design, conceived for the masses, was to be presented in a small, almost domestic scale – at least taking into account that, from the highway, it would be legible mostly at speed. This is what he defines as contradiction between signifier and signified.

This case-study might illustrate Portas' distrust about the meaning of the word



Figure 2. José Pulido Valente and Luis Álvares Ribeiro building in Coimbra, as presented in the magazine *Arquitectura*. (in *Arquitectura*, nº98, 1967, p.160)

“integration”: it tends to be understood as mimicry, and not as a dialectic process; unless if it is critically adopted, it is only an illusion. A new, modern (and democratic?) architecture must call into question the preexisting sociocultural data, above all in the presence of undeveloped environments or immobilist social structures. But maybe it was something that in Portugal, in the early sixties, architecture could not do by itself:

*(...) We miss a program of civic adventure, a culture arisen from a popular democratic intervention. Therefore, capable of fully characterize an architecture in Portugal.* (Portas, 2005: 30)

### III.

Pedro Vieira de Almeida was writing his degree thesis by the time the Survey was published. In July 1963, the magazine *Arquitectura*, by Portas' own initiative, launched the first part of a set of three articles reproducing it almost entirely,

with a shorter title: “Essay on architectural space”. The interest in this text goes far beyond the debate on the Survey – the very author declares that its reasoned critique won’t possible take place in an academic thesis. However, considering that one of the symptoms of the deep crisis related with architectural practise in the late fifties was the deterioration of the word “space”, and following the attempt of clarification already intuited by Bruno Zevi, Vieira de Almeida proposes to study the processes of determining space regardless the particular or circumstantial spaces that might result from it. This is the key point that we should have in mind for these brief notes.

Thinking how the crisis of modern architecture – considered a cultural crisis, reflected in the gap between a mature formal language and its forgotten social premises – echoes in Portugal, writes:

*It seems to me, in our particular case and taking in consideration previous experiments, that we run two diametrically opposed risks: to follow with mediocre servility trends that do not matter to us; or to restrict our attitude to a isolationist provincial culture. (Almeida, 1962: 21)*

Exemplifying the latter, he refers a ‘*certain tendency to think in terms of “Portuguese contemporary space”*’ (Almeida, 1962: 22). This is a direct reference to Fernando Távora, namely to one of the chapters included in his 1962 dissertation for a teaching position in ESBAP. Following a general introduction about organized space, and a more specific chapter about its importance for contemporary man, Távora focuses on the disharmony and the disequilibrium of Portuguese space noticing, however, that ‘*it would be whimsy to consider such spatial crisis specific of the Portuguese context*’ (Távora, 1962: 48). Nonetheless, Vieira de Almeida considers that a lack of conceptual distinction between Portuguese space and *architectural-space* might lead to misunderstandings or to architectonic folklorisms.

By a time when interdisciplinary practises and new critical positions were

beginning to be considered in Portugal, and the '*splendid yet extremely dangerous Survey*' (Almeida, 1962: 24) was published, Vieira de Almeida founds necessary an accurate analysis of basic concepts related to an architectural formal structure. Firstly, he distinguishes scientific, cultural and common-sense aspects related to the perception of space, having in mind doubtful notions as space-time (taken directly from other fields of knowledge and of greater influence, particularly after Siegfried Giedion's study "Space, Time, and Architecture") or circumstance, as referred by Távara.

Differentiating other notions of space (in painting, in music, in theater, in cinema or in sculpture) from *architectural-space*, he verifies that its commonly accepted characterization – the interior/exterior binomial – is unsatisfying as a critical method, as Zevi seemed to noticed in "Architecture as space. How to look at architecture" (1948). Vieira de Almeida proposes to introduce, amongst those primary categories, an intermediate one: the *transition-space*, to which is related the problem of continuity between inside and outside. The concept, probably theorized in Portugal for the first time, is related to a certain experimental tension, considered by Giancarlo de Carlo '*a basic condition for a renewal of architecture in crisis*' (Almeida, 1962: 96).

Besides, he also feels the necessity of clarifying that both internal and external spaces are divided in two secondary categories: nuclear space and complementary space, considering also a non-modeled space for the later. If the *transition-space* intends to overcome the misinterpretation of space as negative or mold of visible forms, as opposition between form and background, it proposes furthermore an open-ended use, unlike the nuclear space, which is naturally destined to accommodate specific functions:

*Admitting the existence and the need for nucleus defining areas of action, is exactly where this action results undefined, where it is not oriented that automatically emerges a sense of ambiguity; this would be necessarily and fundamentally an ambiguity of action.* (Almeida, 1962: 106)

To the nucleus would be, therefore, destined a feeling of comfort, shelter, intimacy or ease. An interior space without nucleus would define a transitory environment, an architecture of movement, like Mies van der Rohe pavilion for the Barcelona 1929 World Fair.

Finally, Vieira de Almeida emphasizes: *‘for an organic development of space is fundamental the existence of nucleus-spaces, without which makes no sense to discuss about continuity’* (1962: 89). If a correct definition of nuclei, skillful interconnected, defines an internal spatial continuity; how to define a continuity towards the exterior, towards that social category of external and modeled space – the urbanistic space? The answer seems by now evident: *‘Fluidity and spatial continuity in the relations between architecture and urbanism are rooted exactly in the transition-space’* (1962: 96). Thus, relating the inner and the outer is about providing a significant space which may have characteristics of both, and not to eliminate the influence zone between them by introducing an element of minimum thickness (the all-glass screen). It is about providing a lasting experience, not an immediate experience.

As previously said, the “Essay on architectural space” was not meant to be presented as a critic interpretation on the results of the Survey, nor its purpose or methodology. In fact, only in the last two pages some documentation is referred, even though in a supposedly key-chapter, shortened due to time constraints. Despite that, the conception of a new category of space inherited from organic concerns, the *transition-space*, explains Vieira de Almeida’s suspicions about a genuine Portuguese space. He is interested in the determination of some spatial characteristics related not only with a national way of inhabiting, but also with wider cultural aspects: a Mediterranean way of living.

Referring Rex Martiensen’s study about Greek architecture, observes the long tradition of the peristyle in the Mediterranean countries, and its relation with the tradition of living in the open space – both in a domestic and in an urban scale, through the *patios* and the *stoae*. Martiensen qualifies the peristyle as a transitional volume, an essential contribution to the continuity within the



Figure 3. Courtyard in Vila Viçosa: photograph taken during the Survey's fieldwork. (in *Popular Architecture in Portugal*, third edition: 1988, vol.3, p.83)

*temenos* due to its capacity of grading the space. Moreover, he sees the Greek city as a coherent whole, with the same spatial characteristics regardless the scale of its components: the unity stands in the permanence of *'the house with its peristyle, the city with its agora, the temple with its interpenetrating pattern of colonnades in the temenos'* (Martienssen, 1977: 146).

Thinking on these forms of spatial, social and political organization, characterized by a daily life occurring in the open space, and noting, in accordance with Martienssen, that some ideals of life in ancient Greece are still close to us, Vieira de Almeida clarifies:

*(...) It is not about outdoor life, but living in a space that is neither exterior nor interior: it is a transition-space, and this way of inhabiting is still today entirely valid. (Almeida, 1962: 127)*

The prevalence of everyday life spent at the *semi-open* air is exactly what he observes in some of the Survey's documents. Considering Portugal's central zone, Beiras, it is for him evident that the elemental, almost rudimentary interior of this spontaneous architecture is counterbalanced by a much more careful semi-open spaces: patios or enclosures attached to the house like balconies, loggias or arcades. These outdoor rooms are often built with perennial materials like stone, and its adequacy as social meeting places is for him unquestionable.

In the south, where the climate is milder, the predominance of spaces without clearly defined bounds between interior and exterior, with a harmonious balance of light and shadow, recall the Italian culture. Vieira de Almeida quotes Eglo Benincasa, in his chronicle "The art of inhabiting in the South", on the importance of preserving, in these transition-spaces, the maximum of privacy. There are many examples of it in the Survey, like a photograph – by him considered '*a marvellous document*' – of a patio in Vila Viçosa (Alentejo) with a group of tools and household objects occupying different niches at different levels.

Despite an area of greater Mediterranean influence and another of greater Atlantic influence – a duality that seems to be understood in the line of Pequita Rebelo and Orlando Ribeiro studies: "Mediterranean by nature, Atlantic by location" – what seems clear to Vieira de Almeida, and generalizable to the whole Portuguese territory, is '*the permanence and richness of life proposals at the semi-open*' (1962: 128). We may even say, based in following texts, that his idea of "Mediterranean" was in fact closer to the sense we now ascribe to Fernand Braudel: a thousand things at once. In an undated text, he distinguishes traces of Celtic cultural tradition in the north; Lusitanian-Romanized in the center; and Moorish in the south. But, no matter how much complex would be this mosaic, the *transition-space*, a conceptual device studied in his degree thesis, would represent the possibility to analyse the *permanence* rather than the *diversity*.



## IV.

By mid-twenties, a sudden interest on the Mediterranean aroused. An interest that grew over the next decade, judging by the number of publications devoted to it. We should have in mind that some Mediterranean islands became by then a haven for many European artists or intellectuals considered “degenerated” by the Nazis, as well as Anglo-Saxon writers who were looking for their personal paradise. Raoul Hausman, André Breton, Raymond Queneau, Walter Benjamin, Jean Selz, or Lawrence Durrell and Henry Miller are only the best known examples. On the other hand, in 1933 was held perhaps the most celebrated C.I.A.M.<sup>2</sup>, aboard on a cruise which sailed the Mediterranean Sea towards Athens.

However, as Bruno Zevi said introducing Eglo Benincasa’s extensive study about Mediterranean life, published in six parts in the first issues of his new magazine *L’Architettura. Croniche e Storia*:

*[The essay on the Mezzogiorno highlights] a psychological and historical situation of ancient genesis which modern architects start only now discovering and yet, they don’t know how to embrace it without artificiality.*  
(Zevi, 1955: 4)

With honorable exceptions, as evidenced by Martienssen’s book (which started with a visit to the ruins of Delfos in 1933) Zevi was probably right. Most likely, he had in mind the manipulation of the Mediterranean tradition carried out by A.C.– *Documentos de Actividad Contemporanea*, a magazine run by some G.A.T.E.P.A.C.<sup>3</sup> architects as Josep Lluís Sert, Torres Clavé or García Mercadal, between 1931 and 1937.

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<sup>2</sup> *Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne*. The international congresses of modern architecture were held between 1928 and 1959.

<sup>3</sup> *Grupo de Artistas y Técnicos Españoles Para la Arquitectura Contemporánea* (Group of Spanish artists and technicians for contemporary architecture): founded in 1930, and subsequently divided in three subgroups (Madrid, Barcelona and S. Sebastian).

Throughout many of its twenty-five issues, spontaneous or popular architecture from the Spanish coasts and the islands (like Ibiza) was valued, mostly in its formal aspects, by its simplicity: white, pure, cubic volumes, without “style”, represented the most straightforward answer to decadent academies. Besides, analyzed under the lens of modern slogans, any humble set of constructions was transformed into a “masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light”. Eventually, the idea of “tradition” implied in some of *A.C.* documents, was more a strategy to settle the roots of modern architecture in the Mediterranean than a real desire to understand the ways of life of a millenary people, and to contribute for their progress.

In the opposite pole, we may find a series of texts written by Walter Benjamin after several sojourns in Capri, Marseille, Ibiza or Naples (some previous, some contemporary from *A.C.* publications). In all we can detect a watchful eye searching beyond appearances, surprised with the complexity of everyday life bursting from everywhere and with the impossibility of separating private and collective realms. The text about Naples is full of excerpts where the rich urban microcosm is masterfully described:

*As porous as this stone is architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades and stairways. In everything they preserve the scope to become a theater of new unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended forever (...). This is how architecture, the most binding part of communal rhythm, comes into being here.* (Benjamin, 1978: 165-166)

We may now venture to say that the interest of Nuno Portas and Pedro Vieira de Almeida on spontaneous architecture was focused – and maybe the reference to Benjamin might seem less gratuitous – in what we could summarize as the vitality of communal life and its ability to constantly reinvent itself without compromising individual needs.



Figure 4. Eglo Benincasa's chronicle. The second part of "The art of inhabiting in the South": *vita all'aperto*, or outdoor life at Puglia. (in *L'Architettura. Cronache e Storia* n°2, 1955, p.242)

When Nuno Portas presented, in the beginning of the seventies, a study about "evolutive housing", headed to solve the most urgent needs of peri-urban population, it was clear that the lesson on popular architecture was learned. On the basis of the plan was a strict definition of what should be built by the authorities (all the infrastructures) and what was left to be done by each family (changing or enlarging the standardized one-storey built core within a specif plot, according to different needs or economic possibilities). The capacity of self-regulation and self-construction, as observed by Maurice Aymard, was common in the Mediterranean: the house, very simple, almost elementary, often constituted by a single division, is a basic cell; but when necessary, it *'grows, multiplies, attaches a closed space - the Arab Zariba, develops around an interior courtyard.(...) All in surface, rather than in height.'* (1987: 144). The valorization of the yard as space of great vitality have been considered, in the sixties, as an



Figure 5. A traditional glazed balcony at Prova, interior Beira: photograph taken during the Survey's fieldwork. (in *Popular Architecture in Portugal*, third edition: 1988, vol.2, p.44)

alternative to big-scale modern ensembles in some research of French sociologists like Henri Lefebvre. Portas understood that it could also be a generative element, a possibility of introducing a margin of flexibility in highly controlled programs such as affordable housing.

This idea was foreseen by Pedro Vieira de Almeida, in a broader sense, for the *transition-space*. Not only the exterior yard or court, but also semi-open spaces within the house, should provide a margin of flexibility for the users. In the last paragraph of his thesis, and observing Beiras' traditional glazed balconies – where the sun (but not the wind) enters – he points out how close these '*living spaces of multiple and rich usage*' (1962: 129) are to the popular urban "marquises". These often misunderstood outdoor balconies (spontaneously closed by the inhabitants and used as an extension of the living room or the kitchen, or just as laundry) could be, then, critically revalued as spaces of liberty.

It is clear that, both for Portas and Vieira de Almeida, the issues on spontaneous architecture could only become relevant if reconsidered in an urban context; never as a romantic evasion.

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