

Compromise and utopia_ an interrupted intent of the modern endeavour

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“The portuguese architect cannot waste time around a sterile plasticity and aesthetics, purely decorative. He would walk toward a professional addiction, incur in unnecessary compositional procedures, unilateral choice of methods, in only partial resolutions of the problems at hand.” (Bonito, 1971, p. 3) – sustains Mário Bonito, in 1971, in an article entitled “A universalidade na arquitectura”, in a local newspaper, Notícias da Amadora - Semanário Popular.

This article raises the issue of false architecture, as in the 40s with the *Portuguese House problem (Problema da Casa Portuguesa)*, but now, in the early seventies he references the formalist themes associated with the *Inquiry to Popular Portuguese Architecture*, alerting us of the consequences of pragmatic responses to large scale orders or projects linked unilaterally to real estate investment.

These proposals do not approach the pressing housing problem of the sixties and seventies by understanding the social issues as one of their main themes or tools of design.

The ideological dimension of the design will be simply submitted to the financial endeavor, reducing the design process to a rational internal layout and an external characterization of formal deductions freely evoking architectural archetypes, mimicking, and inclusively traditional structural and constructive details.

For Mario Bonito (1921-1976) one of the permanent values of architecture will always be the concern of man to solve the problems contained in *the conditions of his existence*. *“The dominant concern of man, since remote times to the present day, was the concrete and effective resolution of the problems concerning the conditions of his existence, i.e., an open struggle against the merciless laws of nature. Destroying to rebuild in a new way, using new methods and procedures, sometimes experimental, opening pathways and trying new directions man has modified the realities of life.”* (Bonito, 1971, p. 3)

Mario Bonito desired and believed in the transformation of his time, but only through social responsibility as an architect and a citizen, both in the performance of his duties and in his day to day routine.

Here we can find the first approach to understanding the social and disciplinary framework surrounding the SAAL process. The expression *Architecture is in the street* will be a condition/circumstance to which modern architects aspired, especially the third generation, heavily politicised, as a way to address the real problems of society and its built environment.

Alvaro Siza’s housing project, São Victor SAAL, 1974/77 and Mário Bonito’s OURO Building, 1951/55, reflect this condition – the intent of expressing full social responsibility, citizenship, through architecture. Moreover, in the SAAL process, the participation and

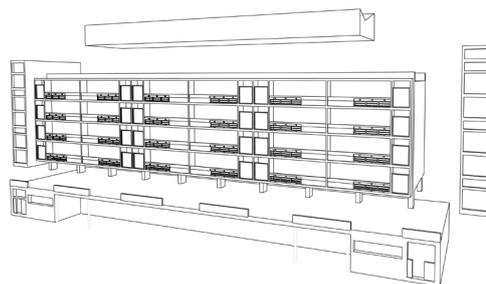
Ouro Industrial Company Building (Edifício da Empresa Industrial do Ouro), Oporto, 1951/1955.

Photo by the author.



Axonomic of Ouro Industrial Company Building.

Drawing by the author, (2013), *Experimentação do Moderno na obra de Mário Bonito. Um processo de desenho dos anos 40 e 60.*



the urgency to build will be one of the first conditions to express such citizenship.

Both interventions, unique opportunities for Porto's circumstance, focus on a very familiar urban fabric to each author. Mario Bonito with the opportunity to reinforce the principles of modern architecture, through a housing program for employees of the Ouro Industrial Company in a plot with an extensive front on the Fernandes Tomas street, near his home, and Alvaro Siza with the possibility to rethink an extensive interstitial area near to the Superior School of Fine Arts, where he studied, integrating the research and experimentation associated with the much desired and sought after opening of the Porto school of architecture to the real problems of the city.

The multifamily residential building on the Fernandes Tomas street, dated September 1951, with seven floors high and a volume of an unusual extension for the urban pattern of the city, rises above the dominant height of the street, imposing its scale and architectural language of modern syntax. Nevertheless, it establishes a dialogue with the surroundings through not only the building's fragmentation into multiple volumes, but also by the systematisation of the materials with their respective chromatic qualities.

The September 1951 proposal, based on a urban design that establishes a formal break with the traditional city, proposes the independence of the main volume, the highlighting of the two sunken access points, and the failure to solve the irregular void to the west, emphasized the desired break by

promoting a lack of continuity in the street front, or even contact with the adjacent buildings, considering their future replacement in accordance with principles of the new proposed building.

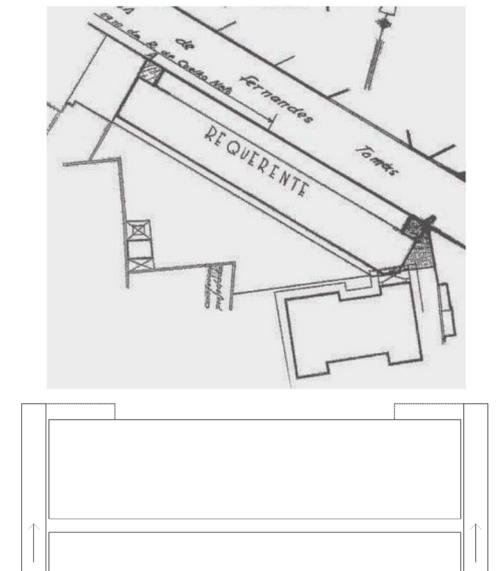
In the final draft of May 1952 the proposal considers a different approach with the context establishing a more direct dialogue with the language of the contiguous buildings and strengthening the alignment of the traditional street with the elimination of the two sunken access points. The first version, September 1951, was approved by *City's Board of Aesthetics*, which means that the changes, in 1952, occur as a result of small programmatic adjustments and Mario Bonito's personal search for renewed urban design themes. This is even more significant when we consider that this evolution in the design is linked to the topics covered in the CIAM VIII, in the previous year¹, *The heart of the City*, with the participation of portuguese architects Alfredo Viana Lima and Fernando Távora.

On the other hand, Alvaro Siza's S. Victor is rooted in the revolutionary process with an extensive proposal reinterpreting the urban pattern of Porto's old centre, from which only 12 housing units and rehabilitation of 3 existing houses were built.

These small scale experimental proposals are an example of how to avoid the *tábula rasa* or the economic criteria associated with real estate speculation, which focuses on profitability at the expense of the conditions of the context as a natural form of citizenship i.e. to accept the context's character as a collective memory, a palimpsest of architectural and urban habits that will make

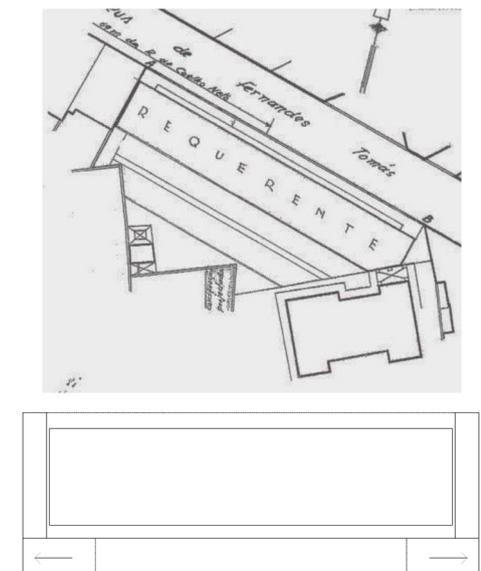
1ª version 1951, expressing formal break with the traditional city.

Drawing by the author, (2013), *Experimentação do Moderno na obra de Mário Bonito. Um processo de desenho dos anos 40 e 60.*



2ª version 1952, expressing continuity with adjacent constructions.

Drawing by the author, (2013), *Experimentação do Moderno na obra de Mário Bonito. Um processo de desenho dos anos 40 e 60.*



the conventional, normally socially banned, into something unique.

Aware of the context in which he was operating and the preconceptions associated with certain urban forms/structures Álvaro Siza will explore the architectural potentiality of the urban type – island (ilhas) – from its persisting precarious condition in the city's fabric.

“The image of the ‘island’ is therefore something that the population rejects completely. But to repudiate such an image and what is implicit in its segregation and poverty, is not necessarily to refuse topographic adaptation system, and what's positive in that community life.” (Siza, 1974-75)

The reinterpretation of *“the ‘island’ as a basis element of the urban fabric”* (Siza, 1974-75) linked to the theme of the ruin as a interpretational concept of time and the particular character of the site – reinterpreting the *“stimulating community life”* – will be one of the key themes to transform the interstitial areas of the blocks into singular spaces, in character and urban design.

These two basic design themes emphasise artistic authorship and the importance of the architect's craft in terms of being able to (re)interpret the real urban issues in play. The symbolic and artistic expression of the *ruin* as an architectural element that defines and organises the public space will be the most striking and innovative expression of the composition and the least understood by the local authorities, with the consequent demolition of all the preexisting elements.

In this sense, we can say that both works incorporate a deep sense of harmony between

the individual and the collective, i.e., the collective sense of the architect's task, but without losing its poetic discourse.

Two key themes are reflected in these projects: the notion of time and place as the means of an informed and cultured position in response to man's problems in his daily routine.

Mario Bonito believed that we can only provide a complete answer to the current problems with a thorough understanding of the options of the past, framed by progress through the architect's task within a socially responsible daily routine.

The two projects linger in time not because they represent timeless solutions or answers but because they express an informed personal poetic discourse in response to specific problems of a given moment. Accordingly, the sense of authorship in architecture is crucial in the construction of the present as a means to interpret a pathway to the future. The transformation of the architect's craft into a set of simple technical support acts, whatever their nature or character, reduces the architect's ability to (re)interpret these conditions and strips him of his capacity to interpret/transform time and place.

In synthesis, it's this transformative condition that will inform the design process of both projects, and make it possible to construct a unique moment in the built landscape of Porto and Portuguese architecture, not by the size of the works but by the relevance of their response proposing specific solutions to selected problems, establishing a close dialogue with the city's character and its representation in our collective memory. This

dialogue evokes architecture in its capacity as Art, *Art with social function*, only possible through the construction of a delicate balance between *feeling and thought*.

The proposals have a conceptual and formal consistency that strengthens the design process, through the identification of the posed problem and its respective formulation of an architectural concept/principle, based on a disciplined logic interpreted by the physical and symbolic conditions of the context, program and commission. Both projects build in a modern syntax integrating the sense of progress with the review of urban patterns adapting them to a personal vision of reality, through the use of abstract/geometric composition reinterpreting their social relevance, namely the condition and meaning of man in the housing unit and the built landscape.

Therefore to consider architecture as an artistic activity in the service of society, will transport this civic responsibility to other disciplines/areas where artistry will enable the progress and the affirmation of an informed urban culture.

In synthesis: Architecture as an artistic activity and social phenomenon.

This is one of SAAL's long standing *magna lessons*.

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¹ CIAM 8, held on 7th to 14th July 1951 in Hoddesdon, England; theme: "The heart of the city".