

João Álvaro Rocha: the import of precise simplicity

Inês Doutel¹; Helder Casal Ribeiro²

¹Student at Faculty of Architecture, University of Porto, Portugal

²Assistant Professor Faup; Researcher CEAU – FAUP Group Atlas da Casa – Identidade e Transferência

Abstract

This investigation aims at recognizing the underlining architectural premises that inform João Álvaro Rocha's design process, associated to housing, namely his built proposals for *Programa Especial de Realojamento* (PER) in Matosinhos and Maia. Additionally, the access to primary sources in João Álvaro Rocha's office archive, formed a substantial motivation and the basis for this in-depth study, opening the possibility of understanding through a thorough examination the core principles of his design process.

The main goal of the present paper is to interpret the value of *simplicity* as an architectural notion, a tool, in Álvaro Rocha's work. From rapid sketches or technical drawings to finished buildings, the architecture of Álvaro Rocha holds a comprehensible and unitary significance that conveys his work to the eloquence of *simplicity* – the search for the essential. This is the combined result of rigour and precision as a language, within a pragmatic, but also intuitive, design process, that eliminates the superfluous in order to underline the essence and identity of each architectural element.

The formal and conceptual clarity of Álvaro Rocha's work helps us to understand the importance of a specific design vocabulary that aims at reduction, precision and clarity of space, form and materiality. Furthermore, these characteristics are important to understand and portray Portuguese contemporary architecture itself.

This research was made within the master thesis *João Álvaro Rocha: pensar a casa*, developed in the context of Master's Degree in Architecture, at FAUP, 2015/2016, under the supervision of Professor Helder Casal Ribeiro.

Apresentação

João Álvaro Rocha não acredita em artifícios. Citando o próprio, aquando de uma conferência em Navarra, “*um artifício é sempre um excesso, é sempre uma coisa não necessária*”¹. Tal consideração está directamente relacionada com uma procura pelo essencial. Na sua linguagem, procurar o essencial é *simplificar* – tornar cada peça ou composição irreduzível, incapaz de se lhe retirar mais. Este conceito não supõe uma associação redutora com o carente ou o diminuto; pretende, pelo contrário, nas formas e espaços que cria, traduzir simplicidade. Apenas se eliminarmos o desnecessário, o supérfluo, podemos tornar evidente o essencial, o realmente significativo.² A maneira como concebe o objecto arquitectónico através de um conjunto restrito de elementos – sejam temas, formas ou materiais – é reveladora de uma iteração e insistência como modo de aperfeiçoamento das relações entre as partes. Por intermédio da repetição, esta operação metodológica visa garantir que tudo o que participa na composição se torna certo e inevitável, adequado e simples.

A simplicidade é também um meio para tornar a complexidade inteligível. Apenas por esta via podem constituir-se objectos nítidos e expressivos. Ela está, de resto, relacionada com a ideia de unidade, quando todos os elementos que compõem um edifício encontram uma organização própria e necessária, segundo os princípios de equilíbrio e de harmonia.

As razões de um edifício devem, antes de mais, construir a sua imagem segundo um discurso lógico e ordenado. Só assim será ele capaz de comunicar clareza. Neste sentido, João Álvaro Rocha não se limita a eliminar o supérfluo; ele também se preocupa com as relações que estabelece entre cada parte, para que se transmitam como necessárias e, sempre, com respeito ao sentido do todo. Por essa razão, uma atenção e uma concentração redobradas são direccionadas ao detalhe. Com o objectivo de igualmente se tornar composição, o detalhe evidencia-se como um extracto da obra e exprime a totalidade desta. Podemos afirmar, assim, que o detalhe responde às mesmas questões que deram origem ao projecto. Por meio da elaboração do detalhe, João Álvaro Rocha envolve a construção na forma.

Importa também notar que, não obstante o desenho da justaposição dos diferentes materiais tender a apagar todos os traços de elaboração que possam ser causadores de ruído, tal não significa querer ocultar a composição de cada elemento. É em consonância com o todo que, uma vez mais, os diferentes materiais, as diferentes camadas, assumem uma necessidade de convergência expressiva na articulação das partes.

¹ ROCHA, João Álvaro, em Conferência na Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura da Universidad de Navarra, 2001

² José Manuel Pozo, num dos seus textos sobre João Álvaro Rocha, associa esta atitude ao verdadeiro significado miesiano ‘*less is more*’. Considera que a evidente simplicidade formal dá significado ao ‘*less*’; enquanto o sublinhar da geometria e da construção, na composição da essência formal, dá significado ao ‘*more*’. Cf. POZO, José Manuel, “Architecture with Thickness”, in *João Álvaro Rocha: Architectures 1988-2001*. Milão: Skira Architecture Library, 2003, p. 218

Dos desenhos aos edifícios, o seu trabalho apreende uma significância unitária e compreensível que transporta para a sua obra a eloquência da simplicidade – a procura do essencial. Aquilo que ela comunica é tranquilidade, serenidade, descanso. Anuncia-se silêncio. O ser do edifício não apenas se apresenta harmonioso, como, na medida em que se oferece sem ruído, sem obstáculos, transmite à existência daquele que o habita essa mesma harmonia – deixa-o habitá-lo. Não se trata, com uma arquitectura silenciosa, de anular a linguagem do espaço; trata-se, sim, e acima de tudo, de tornar evidente a sua essência.

As suas obras são um convite ao silêncio: “*os seus edifícios convergem tranquilidade e parecem ter sido concebidos para ocupar o espaço que preenchem, tal e qual onde estão, e serem o sujeito de uma contemplação serena*”³. Sentimos tranquilidade, serenidade, no Lugar do Outeiro, perante o vazio que conforma o espaço onde o edifício se insere; ou em Gemunde, em face da escala da composição ritmada dos edifícios que se erguem numa simbiose com a natureza. Poder-se-á dizer, assim, que o silêncio também se desenha na relação de harmonia entre o corpo edificado e a sua paisagem, construída e natural. Quando há diálogo entre o edifício e a natureza, a arquitectura torna-se silenciosa.⁴

O facto de João Álvaro Rocha confrontar a organicidade da natureza com um rigor geométrico e uma ordem regular de volumes puros não significa ignorar ou virar costas à paisagem. Trata-se, sim, de, por meio de uma estratégia de repetição de volumes e elementos, libertar a carga significativa dos objectos desenhados de qualquer conotação icónica ou simbólica – silenciar a sua expressão.

Em síntese, referimo-nos, enfim, a uma arquitectura sensível ao lugar, discreta mas atenta ao seu contexto, à história e à paisagem. Não pretende, por isso, limitar-se à sua própria imagem ou existência. As obras de João Álvaro Rocha entram em tal relação com o existente que estimulam o nosso sentimento e entendimento do lugar onde o construído se insere. Segundo Peter Zumthor, “[p]ara o novo poder encontrar o seu lugar, precisa primeiro de nos estimular para ver o existente de uma nova maneira. Lança-se uma pedra na água. A areia agita-se e volta a assentar. O distúrbio foi necessário. A pedra encontrou o seu lugar. Mas o lago já não é o mesmo.”⁵. Também com as obras de João Álvaro Rocha o lago deixa de ser o mesmo. Elas não se limitam a tornar a paisagem mais transparente ou inteligível; elevam as suas características, transformam e exaltam o seu sentido. A arquitectura de João Álvaro Rocha é uma sublimação da paisagem.

³ POZO, José Manuel, “Architecture with Thickness”, in *João Álvaro Rocha: Architectures 1988-2001*. Milão: Skira Architecture Library, 2003, p. 218

⁴ “Quando Natureza e artefacto coexistem em perfeito equilíbrio, então alcança-se o estado supremo da arte: o silêncio das coisas. A mesma palavra Natureza pode ter outras conotações: no entanto, é o silêncio das formas perenes.” SOUTO DE MOURA, Eduardo, “Entrevista Eduardo Souto de Moura”, [entrev.] Xavier Guell, in 2G Revista Internacional de Arquitectura, Editorial Gustavo Gili, n.º5, 1998, p. 134

⁵ ZUMTHOR, Peter, “Paisagens completadas” in *Pensar a Arquitectura*. Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 2009, p. 17

*It is no longer a question of substituting one set of planning ideas for another within the closed system, but the situation calls for a radical reappraisal of the whole system.*¹

The present study focuses on the discussion and problematization of some of the emerging themes in the contemporary architecture debate, aiming to evaluate the pertinence of strategic intervention in the city, in a bottom-up method, that allows to respond more effectively to social and urban needs. In this way, the purpose is to question the contemporary architectural production focusing on specific interventions in the city, that are quick in their response, able to awake the regeneration of the surrounding area and interfere in their social dynamics.

The economic reality in Europe and the scarcity of financing, conditioned by the economic crisis that affected the real estate market and the planning of cities, triggered new approaches in the field of architecture, especially in the management of resources associated with small and medium scale urban interventions. Consequently, there have been alternative practices where the main actors are multidisciplinary teams and citizens interested in the problems of the city and public space, that means, concerned with reactivating buildings and neglected areas. Projects are financed through crowdfunding or other alternative financial support. These works give priority to values absent in the *modus operandi* of the economic market, specifically social justice and environmental awareness. The projects start from an understanding of the social role of the architect, who intervenes in a broader field of constraints and not just in the creation of an architectural object that responds exclusively to the program. Decisions no longer come from the empowered but rather from the citizens, in a bottom-up sense.

Through three case studies, selected with rigorous criteria that concern the themes of reactivation of the place, community financing and their social and spatial dynamics, it is proposed to analyse the pertinence of these interventions for the development of cities at an architectural and social level. To embrace distinctive solutions, three collectives of different geographies and *modus operandi* were selected: ZUS, based in Rotterdam (Holland), formed in 2001, coordinated by two architects, KARO* based in Leipzig, formed in 1999, composed by three members, 2 architects and a mechanical engineer/designer and Raumlabor, based in Berlin (Germany) formed in 1999, composed by eight architects/designers.

These collectives, as multidisciplinary teams, are interested in researching new urban opportunities through a specific design and construction process, ensuring an effective urban and social regeneration. Their approach and notions are rooted in the great ideas of the 60s

¹ HUGHES, Jonathan, SADLER, Simon, *Non-plan: essays on freedom participation and change in modern*, p. 28

and 70s; however, they are able to deepen the different participative concepts by turning these utopias and experimental thinking into something real in the complex context that is the contemporary city. The three ateliers work and research in the fields of urban planning and architecture, focusing on the relationship between permanent and temporary facilities, encouraging the participation of the inhabitants and in self-management. The city is perceived as an organic whole where the architectural/structural object is one of several aspects that (in)form it, along with social, cultural and economic structures.

Our aim is to talk about new ways of doing, respecting the human being in its complexity, thus his/her environment and social community, finding alternative ways to the growth-at-any-cost mantra we were forced to believe.²

Eichbaum is a subway station located between the cities of Essen and Mulheim. Located at the intersection of two highways, the station was built in the 70s as part of an infrastructure project for the future, a new zone of high urban density. Like several modernist masterplans, this area facing social and urban transformations, has become an inhospitable place, waiting for a new urban intent to trigger its renewal. Raumlabor proposed, in 2009 *Eichbaumoper*, a real utopia, that transformed the subway station into a gathering point and, ultimately, into an Opera House. Containers stacked in this subway station serve as a meeting point between the locals and the atelier. The station's staircases and platforms have become a temporary stage for several performances by inhabitants, local groups and invited artists. With this intervention, the station can now be used by local residents and artists as a studio and workspace, and also offers space for several activities like workshops, conferences, bar, cinema, art gallery and reading café. The recent *Opera House* has been declared as an architectural symbol of change and reactivation. The success of this project has led to a new vision among the local population, designers and planners. The totally abandoned station has become a place of possibilities for the whole community.

In 2009, KARO* reinterpreted the social meaning of a vacant lot in Leipzig by creating a temporary library articulating different renewed public spaces with the help of the local population. This was an abandoned site with post-industrial landscape, vacant lots and an occupancy rate of 20%. The aim was to improve and create new social networks. Initially an old abandoned store was used to discuss project strategies, which afterwards was converted

² RAUMLABOR, Crowdfunding Cantiere Barca [online], 2015 [Acedido em Dezembro 2016]. Disponível em: <http://raumlabor.net/crowdfunding-for-cantiere-barca/>

into a reading café. One of the renovated public spaces, with a stage like character, was used for primary school plays as well as for public readings, concerts by local bands and other cultural and community events. A short time after the project's launch significant changes were noticeable in the surrounding areas, with the first houses being successfully renewed and sold.

The central district of Rotterdam, characterized by postwar modernism to 80's postmodernism structures, showed the first signs of abandonment in 2006. Along the railway line several buildings, including Schieblock, succumbed to a high vacancy register. The companies that once settled in these offices were drawn out of the city center. In 2008 new developments were about to start, several buildings were scheduled to be demolished giving rise to new and larger office buildings, even though there was no prospects of occupation. In 2009, ZUS with the International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam, officially declared Rotterdam's central district as a Test Site, selecting Schieblock as a pilot case, in order to prove that new and unconventional ways of intervening in the urban fabric could work. In the same year Schieblock's floor plan was already being filled with activities.

From that year on Schieblock has been constantly full of socially interactive activities and in 2012 its influence led to a new bridge, built through crowdfunding, linking the district to neighbouring areas boosting the local economy and consequently integrating a diverse community.

Clearly, the present study acknowledges that these strategic urban interventions, in a bottom-up method, are only one of several ways of interpreting urban and architectural problems i.e. this *modus operandi* cannot be understood as a unique or lonely solution but as another contribution in understanding the complexity of the contemporary urban dilemma.