

“WITH REGARD TO A NEW/OLD BUILDING” THE TEATRO CARLOS ALBERTO

From the recent past to a future memory
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In this beginning of life, only architecture should be born adult.

The refurbishment of the Auditório Nacional Carlos Alberto (ANCA – Carlos Alberto National Auditorium) and its evolution into the Teatro Carlos Alberto (TECA – Carlos Alberto Theatre) was initially developed with a view to respond to the growing need for cultural spaces for the multidisciplinary activities of the new dramatic and representational expressions, for a wider audience where the desired matrix of versatility could become a reality.

On restoration

The problem with restoring or adapting a building to new needs has been an important realm for today's architects and, as such, has been an effective agent in the conceptual development of the discipline of Architecture.

The problem with restoration or reuse marks, in a way, the conflict between two fundamental needs which are, on the one hand, the desire to safeguard the architectural heritage that the past shows us and, on the other, the imperious need to develop modern architecture. This requires the architect to be rigorously aware of these two concepts that underlie a restorative intervention of a pre-existing building.

The conceptual attitude led us to accept “that the present should speak a living language at no detriment to its ideology or its philosophy, which work on their own and are the product of all the eras that we know”. As a reference, the restoration project sought to materialise the words of Alves Costa who suggested: “There should not be even one stone in the building that intelligence has not considered beforehand, whose value and usefulness has not been weighed and approved. A voluntary, conscientious creation deduced not from assumptions or preconceptions, but from a profound and rigorous knowledge of reality” (AAC, 1987). But all too often it is reality itself that carries preconceptions and assumptions which hamper knowledge and try to thwart all the intended rigour. Should this be the reality, dynamic and non-linear, with no weight and no value, that architecture should reflect? We do not believe so and, for this reason, we did not give up and went in another direction.

The proposed intervention

The refurbishment of the Auditório Nacional Carlos Alberto (ANCA) and its transformation into the Teatro Carlos Alberto (TECA) is to some extent an important urban intervention, not only owing to the privileged central location of the building, but above all because of its potent presence as a unique and beloved collective memory of Porto.

As such, there was an effort to value the building as a true historical fact, preserving the symbolic and architectural value which corresponds to updating its traditional use – a place of culture, of fantasy and therefore of varying scale. The design attempted to develop this through markedly vertical spaces in opposition to other exceptionally horizontal ones, creating bodies in opaque and solid materials in contrast to the transparency and the dematerialisation of others, like the theatre spaces where the stage and audience could be (con)fused, and lost spaces now turned into foyers were the extension of a street, old and narrow, which become an indoor plaza, like a proper performance area.

The project seeks to restore and reuse so as to result in a building of a strongly public nature, expressive and sober, where respect for the values of the past is visible. But the intervention should exist without demagoguery, with a contemporary nature and expression typical of the design that creates it.

The new elements are functionally differentiated by using different materials: from the administrative body in wood, to the glass box for public use, to the concrete parallelepiped with a lift for vertical movement. They do not disregard the base structure and inspire a necessary image of meeting and exchange of aesthetic attitudes, fostering a crossover between architectural language and scenographic expression.

Programme objectives

The recommended formal characteristics for the building were the result of several meetings held with several bodies and the Artistic and Technical Boards of the Teatro Carlos Alberto, the Teatro Nacional de S. João, and also of verifying their feasibility.

Thus the modernisation of this Theatre included comfort (quality of the space with regard to the following aspects – being, appropriation of shows, acoustic conditions, etc.), functionality and interaction of the spaces as a whole and in sections, and improvement of the technical conditions for hosting shows.

The project recreates and remakes the design of areas for the audience (for example the stalls), and organises horizontal and vertical circulation in order to establish a better interaction of spaces and guarantee their functionality. This was achieved essentially by creating an open and light foyer, by creating areas for the public to relax and optimising circulation for the public, which did not exist.

The acoustic, air-conditioning and lighting projects defined the main choices and measures to be implemented in each space. However, the overall completion of these projects in terms of equipment was achieved in the medium/long term given the costs involved. In the case of the air-conditioning, the project comprised a complete overhaul besides the auditorium and stage.

The design for the technical restructuring of the stage, under-stage and grid defined the technical conditions that these scenic elements must meet, with a view to optimising the space available at the Teatro Carlos Alberto for versatile use, which time and its multiple diverse uses have vindicated.

In short, the importance of the Auditório Nacional Carlos Alberto as a venue that hosts a significant share of Porto's cultural events, the recognition of this space as a cultural "space of reference" in the city were key factors for this project.

The goal of the general architecture project was to rework and adapt the building for innovation so that it would provide a space in which to experiment with new scenic performances and theatrical representation.

There was a concerted effort to equip TECA with a number of areas that responded in terms of specificity and size to a range of demands, reorganising underused areas without affecting the quality and comfort that the respective uses require.

As a result, the intervention incorporated a relative increase in the building's volume, providing it with better internal organisation areas as well as permitting the development of a more complete and comprehensive functional programme. This allowed the fulfilment of the initial objectives of creating a space that is open, fluid, "without preconceptions" and with the desire to disturb what Thomas Bernhard advocated in "Minetti" and, in spite of the avoidable cuts along the way... only today does it feel like we have brought this Theatre to our good Porto.

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