

THE SUBVERSIVE SURVEY: ARQUITECTURA POPULAR EM PORTUGAL

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INTRODUCTION

A planning application, chosen at random from the shelf, tells us a lot about the current use of fieldwork in architectural production. We find the architect's drawings, not just of the proposal but of the proposal in its place: before and after. Artful lineweights, textures and labelling suggest relationships with the existing place, justify difference and highlight similarity. Carefully taken, and carefully cropped, photographs of the site and its context demonstrate precedents for the proposal in the surrounding area: roof heights, relations of building to pavement, material colours. Choreographed public consultation events are documented in the rosiest possible way to demonstrate community support. The planning statement, written in a kind of demented architectural legalese, defends the proposal's offer to the neighbourhood, backed up by precisely extracted quotes and data as supporting evidence: public transport indicators, planning history, walking times. The combined efforts of the 'design team' are channelled into evidencing the 'rightness' of the project: a rightness that the local planning department will interrogate. This model of fieldwork is therefore most potent at the moment of approval, at the point of formally justifying an architectural intention. It is subservient to this intention, regardless of a given architect's attitude to context and site research, and will never be tested after construction is completed.

In this paper I want to explore a model of fieldwork that queries this need for 'rightness' by stepping beyond the processes of an architectural project, indeed a model which implicitly celebrates the bias and inherent agenda of any research. Outside of architectural production, but perhaps even closer to the workings of culture, the example I want to discuss is a 6-year documentation of the vernacular architectures of Portugal in the middle of the twentieth century. Far from the polite recording of vanishing traditions that this description implies, the 'Inquiry into Popular Architecture in Portugal' was conceived of as a fundamentally subversive process of fieldwork in the context of extreme political adversity.

The paper begins with a historical survey of this adversity, namely the *Estado Novo* (or 'New State'), which governed Portugal from 1933 to 1974. The New State's political ideology can be seen, as always, in its architecture, and this built expression is deliberately foregrounded in the text that follows. As history progresses, it becomes increasingly important to record resistance, both political and architectural, to the New State's dogma. This resistance would reach its architectural peak in the production of the 'Inquiry', and its political peak in the revolution of 1974.

HISTORY

The New State, the most enduring dictatorship in Europe, was led for most of its existence by António de Oliveira Salazar. Salazar's regime overtly developed a paternalistic, tradition-focussed notion of Portuguese culture rooted in the idea of 'fatherland'¹, and generated policies which maintained an increasingly arcane *status quo* in an atmosphere of paranoia, repression and coercion. With the aim of retaining what were deemed as essential traditional values of family and rural existence, the regime limited economic, cultural and social development, whilst anything beyond a basic education was firmly restricted to an 'educated strata'.² The government focussed much of its energies on Portugal's colonies to the detriment of other international relations³, creating a country which could stand 'proudly alone'⁴ on the world stage. This isolationist stance, 'turning its back on Europe'⁵ would ultimately lead to catastrophic colonial wars and the regime's 1974 downfall.

The New State's approach to architecture took on a variety of characters during its lifetime, and a brief survey of these reveals profound social and aesthetic contradictions.

Briefly, though travel and cross-fertilisation of ideas were highly restricted even during the early years of the regime, modernism could thrive, reflecting the government's initial impulse to modernise and galvanise the underdeveloped country, albeit along fascist lines. Independent works such as the *art deco* Coliseu and Casa Serralves in Porto stand as testimony to this time, and can be read, alongside other examples, as more-or-less straight 'imports' of then-current architectural languages from beyond Portugal.

But, as elsewhere, modernism would swiftly be wedded to fascism. Salazar spearheaded the comprehensive modernisation and redevelopment of Coimbra University along modernist lines, along the way wiping out much of the 'old city' (Alte de Coimbra), and the resulting buildings embody a 'patriotic rather than international, corporatist rather than liberal'⁶ agenda whilst borrowing from German and Italian fascist design.

The New State also provided public housing, which initially took the form of single-family dwellings, reflecting both the traditional 'family values' favoured by the regime and a fear that collective housing provided a greater opportunity for subversive activity.⁷ State housing, however, evolved into the provision of low-rise blocks of watered-down modernism on the peripheries of cities, leading to social segregation and vacated urban centres; an anti-urban stance which merely widened the scale at which subversion could be controlled.

In parallel with this modernist trajectory, however, the architectural language of the 'educated strata' took as its inspiration the much earlier 'Casa Portuguesa' movement. Led by the architect Raul Lino, this movement had proposed a 'return to the 'inner soul' of ancient Portuguese vernacular architecture and landscape',⁸ which for the most part saw fruition in the form of highly decorated, overtly 'Portuguese' detached dwellings which combined modern methods of construction with profoundly self-conscious applied decoration. In the hands of Lino and his followers, this approach had led to a number of eclectic and joyful private houses at the turn of the century, but its later appropriation by the elite of the New State led to it becoming a kind of 'half-remembered' tradition, a 'debilitating eclecticism'⁹ filtered through the preferences and aspirations of the rich, and dovetailing neatly with Salazar's traditionalist tendencies. A pattern book of accessible, superficially-ennobled vernacular.

The social legacy of this era was therefore profoundly inconsistent and divisive. While the reality for the majority was an authoritarian imported modernism, the reality for the privileged was a hyper-nostalgic, fantastical evocation of traditional architecture, reliant upon a generous budget and an autonomous site, and therefore forever out of reach for the majority.

This schizophrenic situation ended in 1940 with the opening of the *Exposição do Mundo Português* exhibition in Lisbon, timed to celebrate the anniversary of Portugal's founding in

1140. In what Fernandes¹⁰ has described as a 'nationalistic 'climax'', the domestic ideology of the 'casa portuguesa' became the dominant form for state projects, and in architectural terms came to represent a 'national style' or even 'official taste'. This new architecture, a super-sized collage of totalitarian scale and folk evocation, perfectly expressed Salazar's vision for Portugal. Aesthetically, socially, and politically, the country severed itself from the discourse and fashions of its European neighbours, and become literally its own world. In architecture as well as in other forms of cultural production, the 'fatherland' would provide its own language, without recourse to developments beyond its borders.

1947 was a decisive year in Portuguese architectural culture; the beginning of a coherent architectural opposition to the New State's 'official taste'. Two published texts, by Francisco do Amoral and Fernando Távora, made the opening moves in this opposition. In an editorial in the influential Lisbon magazine *Arquitectura*¹¹, Amoral proposed a scientific, 'systematic'¹² study of Portuguese regional architectures. The thinking behind this proposal can be better understood by examining Távora's subsequent essay 'The Problem of the Portuguese House'¹³, published later that same year in the magazine *Cuadernos de Arquitectura*, in which the young architecture student brilliantly conveyed the frustrations of a generation of architects. Deriding the faux-traditionalism of the state ethos whilst upholding the right of Portuguese architects to look beyond their own soil for inspiration, Távora wrote that 'It is neither fair nor reasonable for us to ignore, in pursued ignorance, the works of the great masters of today.'¹⁴ Furthermore,

The past is a prison from where very few know how to easily and productively escape; it has great value, but it must be looked at not in relation to itself but to us... The authors of these 'portuguese houses' have forgotten and still forget that the traditional forms of the art of building do not represent a decorative whim or a baroque manifestation.¹⁵

In what would become a critical tactic in the coming years, Távora took a stance which aligned itself with the government's focus on popular tradition whilst deriding the superficiality of their approach- notably focussing attention on the 'authors' of the works rather than the state. His essay laid the foundations of an approach which would come to have an enormous influence; combining as it did an awareness of Portugal's architectural heritage with contemporary discourse. Most significantly, Távora stated that:

The study of Portuguese Architecture, or construction in Portugal is not as yet done. A number of archaeologists have written about and dealt with our houses but, as far as we know, none of them has given a contemporary sense to this study thus making it a participating element of new Architecture.¹⁶

Here is Távora's profoundest critique of the 'official taste'. The state's own preference for the pseudo-traditional is revealed, at least to sympathetic readers, as rumour, anecdote, chinese whispers, with little relation to the reality of Portugal's vernacular traditions. This call to action, alongside Amoral's, was the opening shot in an underground war against 'official taste' that would play out over the coming years.

Távora quickly established himself as a key figure in the architectural culture of the time, representing Portugal at the CIAM congresses and, in the spirit of his earlier article, designing new urban quarters along Athens Charter lines.¹⁷ He was present at the founding of Team X, and took part in their growing dissatisfaction with the orthodoxies of the early modern movement. This dissatisfaction was reflected in the designs he was producing at the time, particularly a municipal market in Vila da Feira. The design was brusque, materially rich, and attuned to the particularity of its place and its public. Távora would later describe it as 'not only a place for trading things, but for trading ideas, in an invitation for people to meet.'¹⁸ The divisive, anti-subversive architecture of the New State was being quietly but profoundly subverted.

In 1955-6, whilst Távora collaborated with his protégé Álvaro Siza on masterplanning a new park on agricultural land in Matosinhos¹⁹, Salazar's government clamped down decisively on free speech in Portugal. The P.I.D.E., the New State's secret police, was at the height of its activities, and the publicly assertive stance of Távora's earlier essay, risky back in 1947, became practically unthinkable. New tactics would be needed in order to oppose the stifling orthodoxy of the regime, and the long-mooted 'Inquiry' into regional architecture, proposed as a means of implicitly critiquing the vagaries of the 'official taste', was formally initiated by the National Union of Architects (SNA). Remarkably, and significantly, the Inquiry was state-funded, the SNA having persuaded the Minister of Public Works²⁰ that an investigation of Portugal's rich architectural traditions could only be of benefit to the country's sense of identity.

From 1955 to 1961, a team of eighteen architects covered a total of 50,000 kilometres for the sake of the Inquiry, "by car, or scooter, on horseback or on foot",²¹ to document Portugal's vernacular architectures, returning to compile and edit their 10,000 photographs and accompanying material into a summary volume published in 1961 as 'Arquitectura Popular em Portugal'. The architects worked in regional teams, with one 'lead' architect and two assistants, and each region was allowed to follow its own methodology.

In 1958, Humberto Delgado, an attaché to the Portuguese Embassy in the United States, stood against Salazar for the Presidency of the Republic. Though in retrospect this appears suicidal²², Delgado had wide popular backing, with public demonstrations taking place in both Lisbon and Porto and support from across the political spectrum, including sections of the Catholic church²³. Delgado was defeated, but his campaign generated a flood of civil unrest over the following years, whilst opening up the possibility of resistance at higher levels. The civil disturbances included mutinies, an attempted coup, a galvanised Communist party which proposed a programme of 'national rebellion', continuing mass demonstrations, and an increasingly militant student population.

1961 saw the publication of the 'Programme for Democratisation of the Republic', a pioneering and coherent attack on the authority of the New State and, more quietly, 'Arquitectura Popular em Portugal'. Echoing Távora's words of 1947, the introductory text plainly stated the Inquiry's critique of the national style.:

There is no existing 'Portuguese Architecture' or a typical Portuguese house... It is not enough for a city dweller to put on a pair of roughly woven trousers, a pair of clogs and to hoist a hoe onto his shoulder to become part of the rural environment... To become integrated, or to belong, is [a] much more profound and serious concept. In no way is it a mere mode of dress for either people or buildings.²⁴

The introduction goes on to state that 'from the study of local Portuguese Architecture lessons of coherence, honesty, economy, skill, function and beauty can, and must, be learnt',²⁵ emphasising the authors' intention that the Inquiry would take on a propositional role in the creation of new architecture, a process that they knew had already begun, at least in the practice of Távora and Siza. In Távora's case, projects like the summer house at Ofir and the Quinta da Conceição tennis pavilion reflect a decisive break from his earlier internationalist modernism, a break echoed in the younger Siza's designs for the Boa Nova tea house, Quinta da Conceição swimming pools and Matosinhos Parish Centre. These projects are characterised by a subtle interplay between an appreciation of international contemporary architecture, which brought its own historical precedents (the importance of Wright and Aalto have been well documented)²⁶ and an awareness of vernacular building traditions that plugs directly into the work of the Inquiry. In Távora's tennis pavilion, particularly, it is possible to read this interplay: in the fixings that tie timber rafters together, in the democracy of the open, tiled floor, and in the rough junction between heavy granite and finely finished concrete. The ideology of the Inquiry, stretching back to the polemics of 1947, was being explored through building, 'taking history as an operational instrument for the construction of the present.'²⁷

For our purposes, it is only necessary to state a few subsequent facts from history. In 1968 Marcelo Caetano replaced Salazar as leader of the New State. Early hopes for increased freedom under Caetano proved groundless, and it was not until military opposition to Portugal's continuing colonial wars reached breaking point in 1974 that the New State was finally overthrown. After a difficult transitional period, Portugal was reconstituted as a democratic state.

ANALYSIS: INQUIRY AS SUBVERSIVE TOOL

For a paper ostensibly concerned with the present, much time has been spent dealing with history. Yet it is only through detailed examination of the historical context of the Inquiry that the intelligence behind its production, and its relevance to contemporary practice, can be understood. The following section then, takes the Inquiry document as a cultural product, embedded in its time and place, with a view to extracting such contemporary lessons.

In common with many of their contemporaries across Europe and beyond, Portuguese practitioners of the late 1950's felt a sense of inheritance from the first generation of modern architects: what Peter Smithson has beguilingly called a 'moral overlap'²⁸ wherein the early ideals of Corbusian modernism could be revised in accordance with new ideas of particularity of place, people and construction. However, whilst their contemporaries were generally able to live up to this perceived inheritance in alliance with their national governments, Portuguese practitioners found themselves in an increasingly constrained situation, both as citizens and as architects. The early flowering of modernism had died a premature death, and this hurt both aesthetically and politically. For anyone opposed to the paternalism of the New State, a choice between orthodox pastiche for the rich and authoritarian parody of modernism was hardly a choice at all. The critical use, or even borrowing, of past forms exists in many architects' practices, but when aligned to an increasingly arcane and paternalist state apparatus, the urge for an alternative became paramount.

With this in mind, two dominant tendencies can be traced. The first was the urgent need for an architecture of today - appropriate to its time, place and people - and the second was the conviction that the 'history' propagated by the state was a false one. The Inquiry works as a profound political tool on many levels, but its reconciliation of these two urges is the most fundamental. By working on a regional basis, in terms of both organisation and methodology, the Inquiry proved above all else the diversity of Portuguese vernacular culture, and therefore the inadequacy of any attempt at homogeneity. Time and again, the Inquiry proved that there is no single 'essence' to Portuguese architecture, but many. 'There are far greater differences between a village in the province of Minho and a "monte" in the Alentejo than between certain Portuguese and Greek buildings'²⁹, the introduction states. Such evidence advocates for a locally inflected form of architecture but also stands against the imposition of generic rule systems. In a time of increasing regulation in the UK as elsewhere, it is important to register the gap between assumed standards and actuality, the frequent impotence of standardised regulations when confronted with the complexities of a real situation.³⁰ Fieldwork is perhaps most potent when set up to disprove assumptions and generalisations.

The aesthetic of the published version of the Inquiry belies its modernist intentions. Beyond the text, the book is made up of photographs, richly-detailed plans & sections, and diagrammatic maps at the scale of a village or region. The photographs are in general high contrast, richly saturated and shadowed. This approach emphasises the strong formality of the subject matter, but also aligns it with Modernist photography of the time, in the same way that James Richards and Eric de Maré were doing with their studies of British industrial architecture³¹. In this way, the 'simplicity' of the vernacular is aligned with the simplicity of modernism, and away from the frivolity of 'official taste' decoration. Where decoration occurs, the making process is meticulously documented, revealing its specificity and

appropriateness, perhaps its relation to local soil or plants. The drawings which complement the photographs, on the other hand, are freehand, and frequently present the plan and section of each building as an inhabited space, with particular attention paid to artefacts, occupation, and texture. Daily life is thus related directly to built form, underlining what can only be described as the rationality of the subject. Finally, the diagrammatic maps, some of them drawn from the archives, emphasise how the nature of a roof or doorway can relate to the regional qualities of the place, as for example in the section covering the Douro river valley, where time is spent describing the valley's qualities and economic relationships in relation to the scale of a dwelling.

Salazar's regime took rural values, or its conception of them, as sacrosanct. Again, the Inquiry deftly aligns itself with the regime's ideology and takes an almost exclusively rural sample. 'Many Lisbon people are closer to New York than Mirando do Douro'³², states the Introduction to the Inquiry, but the implication here is that rural life was being contaminated by the towns; state radio, propaganda, and the superficial 'culture' pedalled by the New State. More importantly, a focus on rural existence made explicit the relationships between individuals, families and communities: mutual independencies and associations that the New State sought to destroy.

The Inquiry took a magnificent risk in subverting the state orthodoxy. The danger here is clearly a literal one in terms of playing with the ideologies of a state quite happy to imprison and punish anyone who might step out of line. The Inquiry stands as a unified effort by the architectural community to suggest the future by the only means available. The only direction for speculative research was the local and the extant, and in pursuing this direction the surveyors walked a tightrope between nostalgia and progress. 'Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect,' wrote the authors of 'Learning from Las Vegas', 'Not the obvious way, which is to tear down Paris and begin again, as Le Corbusier suggested in the 1920s, but another, more tolerant way; that is, to question how we look at things.'³³ If the agenda at the heart of 'Learning from Las Vegas' was to question, through fieldwork, the orthodoxy of modernism, then that of the Inquiry was a similar questioning of the orthodoxy of the Portuguese state. Boa Nova tea house, Álvaro Siza's early masterpiece in Matosinhos, derives a 'new' architecture for Portugal from the international expertise of Wright and Aalto and merges them with a sophisticated re-interrogation of the vernacular. The spatial ingenuity and sheer exultation of the new that Boa Nova exudes could not be further from the New State's vision, but via the Inquiry it was able to come from right under the state's nose, funded by it whilst wearing easy veils of nostalgia and conservatism. Like 'Learning from Las Vegas', the importance of the Inquiry lies not in its data but in its methodology. To continue with Siza as an example, he has always prioritised international influences over the that of the Inquiry, but one can see in these early works a sense of enquiry and exploration, an openness to place, which the efforts of the Inquiry can only have reinforced. Nuno Portas writes of the 'permanent presence of opposition'³⁴ in Siza's early works, suggesting a willingness to work with the conflicts of site and public without the need for reconciliation.

Fundamentally, the Inquiry had ambitions beyond conventional architectural practice. Though it did not bring down any governments, it was the means by which architects, from academia and practice, could work towards a common goal that stood in opposition to the dictatorship under which they lived. This opposition was perhaps made necessary by a highly adverse political climate but remains relevant for today's culture. It is an example of architects stepping beyond the design process, and entering into a form of practice which takes contemporary culture and state apparatus as its subject: which takes them as tangible artefacts to be engaged with, queried and reworked.

Notes

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- ¹ As evidenced in the New State's motto, 'God, Fatherland and Family'.
- ² Mitchinson, Phil. *Worker's History – Portuguese Revolution 1974*. Socialist Appeal, May 1994. <http://www.marxist.com/History-old/portugal74.html> Accessed 19.11.2009.
- ³ This colony-focussed policy is exemplified by a propagandist map, 'Portugal is Not a Small Country', published in the early years of the New State. This map overlays Portugal's extensive colonies onto a map of Europe, and compares their total land area favourably against those of Spain, France, England, Italy and Germany combined, thus emphasising the role of the colonies in Portugal's economic and political significance and justifying the New State's vision of an autonomous republic.
- ⁴ Attributed to António Salazar in Lloyd Jones, Stewart. 'Portugal's History Since 1974'. CPHRC Working Papers, Series 2 Number 1, November 2001. www1.ci.uc.pt/cd25a/media/Textos/portugal-since-1974.pdf Accessed 19.11.2009.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Moniz, Gonçalo Canto, *The Portuguese "May 68": Politics, Education and Architecture*. European Journal for American Studies 2008. <http://ejas.revues.org/document7253.html> Accessed 19.11.2009.
- ⁷ Santos, Boaventura de Sousa, and João Arriscado Nunes, *Reinventing Democracy: Grassroots Movements in Portugal*, Oxford: Routledge, 2006. pp. 53
- ⁸ Fernandes, José Manuel. *Portuguese Architecture in the 20th Century*. Paper delivered to the International University of Catalonia, 15.02.2005.
- ⁹ Frampton, Kenneth. *Álvaro Siza Complete Works*, Milan: Electa, 1999. pp. 11. Frampton relates this tendency to the earlier *Heimatstil* period of the Third Reich.
- ¹⁰ Fernandes, José Manuel. *Portuguese Architecture in the 20th Century*. Paper delivered to the International University of Catalonia, 15.02.2005.
- ¹¹ See Frampton, Kenneth. *Álvaro Siza Complete Works*, Milan: Electa, 1999. pp. 11
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Távora, Fernando. 'The Problem of the Portuguese House', in Luis Trigueiros et al., *Fernando Távora*, Lisbon: Blau, 1993. pp. 13
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Trigueiros, Luis et al., *Fernando Távora*, Lisbon: Blau, 1993.
- ¹⁸ Ibid. pp. 58
- ¹⁹ See, for example, Trigueiros, Luis et al., *Fernando Távora*, Lisbon: Blau, 1993; Rui Morais de Sousa et al., *Álvaro Siza 1954-1976*, Lisbon: Blau, 1997.
- ²⁰ Though, in prior attempts to gain state funding, appeals to the Institute for High Culture (itself a revealing title) had proved fruitless.
- ²¹ Var., *Arquitetura Popular em Portugal*, 4th Edition. Lisbon: ODA, 2004. pp. 407
- ²² Indeed Delgado was later murdered in 1965, with the P.I.D.E widely believed to be the culprits.
- ²³ For example, in 1959, the Bishop of Porto wrote a letter to Salazar criticising the people's lack of freedom, and was duly exiled from the country.
- ²⁴ Var., *Arquitetura Popular em Portugal*, 4th Edition. Lisbon: ODA, 2004.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ See, for example: Frampton, Kenneth. *Álvaro Siza Complete Works*, Milan: Electa, 1999.
- ²⁷ Source unknown; attributed to Alexandre Alves Costa.
- ²⁸ Spellman, Catherine, and Karl Unglaub, *Peter Smithson: Conversations with Students*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005.
- ²⁹ Var., *Arquitetura Popular em Portugal*, 4th Edition. Lisbon: ODA, 2004. pp. 403
- ³⁰ For a study of such a situation in current Permitted Development legislation in the UK, see Knight, David, Finn Williams, Europa et al., *SUB-PLAN: A Guide to Permitted Development*. 2009.
- ³¹ Richards, J. M., *The Functional Tradition in Early Industrial Buildings*. London: The Architectural Press, 1958.
- ³² Var., *Arquitetura Popular em Portugal*, 4th Edition. Lisbon: ODA, 2004. pp. 404

³³ Venturi, Robert, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, 2nd Edition. Massachusetts: MIT, 1977.

³⁴ Portas, Nuno, *The Search for a Language*, in Frampton et al., *Alvaro Siza Poetic Profession*, Milan: Electa, 1986. pp. 40