

The detail of the general project, the shadow: The polo da Mitra by Vítor Figueiredo.

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Abstract

The text seeks to verify what type of territory the South, the Alentejo, is and how one lives or survives there. It seeks to show an architecture that negotiates with the territory, through a culture or a way of using it. It also negotiates with the landscape through elements that are recurrent to it or perform the same function, which is to offer shade, to protect and to disclose, without, however, being mimetic or formalistic. It also seeks to identify similarities in the rhythms and rhymes of architectural elements which, although with a contemporary design, refuse an immediate image, but allow enjoyment and enable us to appreciate what we retain from an object in the Alentejo landscape.

This text aims to disclose the work of Vítor Figueiredo in the Polo da Mitra, in Évora, which, unfinished, rises up against an image, against authorship and against an administrative functionalism of form and of drawing.

Keywords: Vítor Figueiredo; Anonymous architecture; Landscape; Shadow; Inevitable.

Full Article

Images 1, 2 and 3

“I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect”

Edgar Allan Poe

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Seeing. Seeing carefully is what matters. Seeing like those who live there and are present. Seeing better. Looking with distracted but felt attention. Calmly finding and remembering. Residing, or the desire to reside. We start with the now, with what we see and feel. With the Work. There is nothing better than the end to begin with. The real. ¹

An open landscape in black and white where we see the yellow of the heat that exudes from the earth. A road cuts the image diagonally. A car cuts the silence and the singing of the cicadas. In a movement of the gaze, the telephone and telegraph poles appear, inventing a black verticality in the landscape, almost white due to the heat. The sound of the Morse and the brilliance of the white

ceramic supports on the black poles. In black and white, this is how the film/documentary by Fernando Lopes (1935-2012) began with the title "The stones and time, Évora"². His first movie.

Then, as a counterpoint to this open landscape, the shadow of the cork tree. The slow and precise and violent work under the heat of a group of cork extractors hanging from the tree, revealing the rawness of a living trunk and who, after the last digit of the year has been painted, will return nine years later to the same task, in that same tree. The cork cycle takes place every nine years.

Time in the Alentejo is not metaphysical. It is real. Further on, the "Silver Water" aqueduct appears as a way to present Évora from outside, from the field, solitary in the sun, in the middle of the plain. In his first preliminary studies, his first impressions for the Malagueira neighbourhood, Álvaro Siza drew the same thing. Lines that are to be the aqueduct against the closed, circular wall of Évora (Siza, 2000,104, p. 112). It is also with an "aqueduct" that "another scale will be defined" (Siza, 2000,119) and, through the interstitial and expectant spaces it creates, the different intervention times are constructed in the built fabric of this neighbourhood, where, since 1977 with Siza, the populations have been operating and making it a living and urban system.

Coming from Lisbon, after passing the Malagueira neighbourhood and facing the Évora wall, we turned towards Alcáçovas and, twelve kilometres later, turned right to the Herdade da Mitra. When we see in the distance the small convent of Bom Jesus de Valverde, flanked by cork oaks and holm-oaks, to our left we see the buildings designed by Manuel Tainha (1922-2012) in the 1960s to house the new buildings of the *Escola de Regentes Agrícolas* (Agricultural Managers School).

Then, in the distance, apparently alone, on the highest point of the hill, between cork-trees, stands a long portico that is massive below and laminar on top, under a red tile roof shading, appearing all the way along the curve of the road that goes up. Vitor Figueiredo's Polo da Mitra appears in the distance after the crossing that diverts us from the aqueduct that accompanied us, when we take the direction towards the Herdade da Mitra, on the Alcáçovas road.



Images 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9

II

The plain is not flat. It is like the sea, rippled. This is how Vítor Figueiredo saw it, "contemplating the plain in silence and rediscovering the same experience of the Sea-Ocean of his childhood" (Pinto, 2004,10). So we went up and, in a slight counter-curve, we saw the building. A heavy, massive, set of porticoes, like a basement. They support a second set of cleaver blades that confer the building depth up to the facade at its bottom, since the upper inner facade only has a third of them and is rounded at the top. These blades are joined at the top by a slab edge with the same size that forms the top of the building. Far away, behind them, stand industrial chimneys, round with a conical shape, over a white volume. As we approach, we discover through a slight vibration of a line of shadow that the second set is, after all, a declination of the first and third one is what we considered to be the second. An ambiguity. There is a second portico, made only in plaster and more delicate. A fold in the plaster joins two spans. It regroups the initial rhythm with a double metric, paused because it is elongated. This separates the most visible portico from the blind forehead above it. From one of the boundaries, to the North, it does not seem to end, incomplete in the metric.

The road does not go to the main entrance of the building. It advances to the open space between another building and then we see the yard. "The space

between the buildings is the generator of the architecture itself (...) it is not about interstitial spaces, space is a generator, in fact, from the beginning it has been, it is what has remained since the project, since the tender (Figueiredo,1999).

In this open area, in this space on top, the south-facing facade is blind. Or obscured by elements of the porticoes that surround the main building. There is no door, no way in. Everything is open, in the form of a gallery, although only at certain moments one enters its interior. It is a structure to start seeing from afar. Like the houses in the Alentejo. With a yard.

And that yard in gravel, here in the Mitra of Vítor Figueiredo, an exterior internalized by the buildings that invent it. And independent of them through the presence of its building, the covered passage between the building in the east and the west. It is not a connection between two buildings.

It is an autonomous element, with oversized blocks, in terms of construction, concept and visibility. Because "if, in fact, the pylons came out in relation to the passage, they would break up and isolated the space from the other. Look, then this trapeze here would be isolated, so the only way this can be the continuity, is in fact, to reverse it and make them a buttress on which something stands."(Figueiredo, 1996). So they stand opposite the pillars and buttresses of the buildings, always facing out. It's a shade, in the gravel yard.

The galleries of all the buildings of the complex are like the cellular walls that Kubler³ discovered in Portuguese plain architecture. They act as mediators with the outside, leaving the sun outside. They invent shadows and deform interpretations, rules, and certainties.

Blocks, buttresses and pedestals. Blades or planes, perpendicular, parallel and juxtaposed to the facades. Ripped, laid down and cut grids. This is how the exterior galleries that surround the buildings are made. Structurally oversized, necessary in terms of composition. They are necessary and artificial to grant them autonomy as the element, depth as protection and density as almost walls, thickness. It is not a bone, it is flesh and muscle. Fat pillars or buttresses support clever blades that let one walk outdoors in the sun and rain. "They define a



totalizing and unifying sense of order, exemplified by the facades of Serlio's engravings and the facades of Palladian buildings. The decoration here coincides with the entire rhetorical composition itself: the syntax of the emergent formal and structural elements converted into ultimate appearance". (Pinto, 2007, p. 102). It is not an architecture down to the bone, because it is not a skeleton, but rather an intense body made of artifice, vitality and serenity. A living body under the Alentejo sun.

The route is no longer drawn, only its apparent movement and its presence. From the sun to the shade, from the warmth to the cool. From the uncertain to the specific. What is revealed here is more the impulse of the movement, the search for the shadow, the look, the landscape. An impulse. The movement is not drawn nor built, rather its necessity is proposed.

It is no longer drawing, rather spaces that articulate themselves. It is more a juxtaposition of elements than a continuum of drawing or of excess of it. It is more the refining of an idea than the exclamation of a drawing. There is no drawing. There are ideas formulated by an author. A practice, a way of life, more than a language. "A way of life so natural that it almost touches the excess" (Kafka, 2004, p.15). An architecture that was already there. We're the ones who show up around here.

But it seems that something is missing, or failing. The detail. Not the architectural detail, but the building detail. But what is really lacking is a builder who objectively does his job. The work stopped, and it was reported in the newspapers⁴. The work was not successful. In the project everything seems clear, which is not to say that it can be done in a careless way. A job that requires more than just managing resources and costs. Perhaps this is why this work, or others by Vítor Figueiredo, are out of time. They require builders who want to do something well done. "At some point I was looking for someone to help me, (...) a builder, a sort of a pseudo-inspection. I fed this illusion and... a worker at Amadeu Gaudêncio, who was a man who had not reached the category of master and was extremely sensitive, came with me to see, we had a conversation, two conversations, a man

with a deep knowledge of what work is" (Figueiredo, 1996) – even though it was unfinished.

There are times when we circulate outside the set and we do not see the roof. We see the edge of the slab of the exterior plane of the facade, and, only farther back in the background or up there we notice the white mass of lanterns that illuminate the corridor without the glass being seen. On top, there are metallic chimneys. More than an apparent pleasure to counter the morality of a building without a roof, the tile roofing becomes the element of unity in the diversity and complexity of the facades, the perception of the object at great distance and as a sum of recognizable elements that place the objects in that landscape. It agrees with it. We must not forget that "landscapes abound on earth. As much as the rest lack them, the landscape is always there (...) and yet, as there is so much of it, it is not over yet"⁵ (Saramago, 1999, p. 9). It is not the spirit of the place, it is a negotiation with the landscape, which was already there. But it is, above all, an absolutely artistic sensitivity according to which, with only one element, it unifies the diversity of the elevations and the elements that compose them.

There is a small detail that gives us the key to everything, like in a detective novel. The building has a roof, but there are no eaves. It does not come out. It does not finish up the facade. The roof is not part of the composition of the facade, it is back there. But it is part of the whole as a higher element that covers all elements that compose it. The roof is the unity, the absolute that brings together the particular, the shadows and the cool of the evening. The roof is also a refusal of pure functionalism, of image austerity, or moral laziness. In its interiority, which are the unfinished courtyards, in the naked or unprotected, unfinished, North facade, which open up to the valley of the Valverde stream, the gables of the cover have no eaves either. There are unfinished plates. This is why the North facade is also beautiful. We see what we are not supposed to see, like the terrain on hold, with the laudanum growing wildly next to the wall dappled with dampness that refuses to be facade because it is an interior, in plain sight. A roof, in the

distance on a white portico. Or how a hedge invents an absolute gesture. The natural, organic way of being in that landscape, which was already there.

Unlike the flat white and blind wall to receive the light, there is an entire complex, almost excessive artifice of modelling the shadow, of lacing the white wall with lines of shadow. Facade walls to receive the shadow of the porticoes. Walls to cut out shadows, like grates. Walls to draw clarity in the shade. The Mitra as a work that reveals the shadow, in the landscape, protecting us from the landscape. When we walk, protect ourselves or move to the porticoes and the gallery they make up, we see what was built there: the shadow, effects of shadow. As a possibility and as the white colour that supports and holds it. The shadow as survival, as the place of the possible. On the white wall. It is impossible to feel in the drawings, except in a procedural and abstract way, how perspective is with regard to reality.

We passed the porticoes. In the gallery there is an interiority of the buildings due to the absence of height spans facing the street. We searched for the way in that was meant not to have a door, but surely without being seen from the outside. Only one opening or a not part of the structure entry provides access to an interior-exterior. A grid of about two metres was later placed and designed, without touching the top and disassociated from the porch, which closes the system. The brightness of the spaces is achieved through filtering. Nothing is direct. The interior is made of diffused light, even in the central corridor, where the vault is cut rhythmically where it meets the wall by a zenith light that flows through the wall in the open of the vault tangent to the wall.

We look at the plans. There's something forced there. The auditorium does not seem to fit, the laboratories seem adapted, and in the public space the big and generous circulations seem inappropriate. But Vítor Figueiredo explained at a talk: "what I want, what I want it to have - it was almost a construction that existed and suddenly someone decided to put some classrooms and things there" (FA, 1999). This is also the project's effort to be part of that landscape.

A system of buildings where not all are there because the whole is incomplete. But still its repetition, the variation of the same elements can still be seen. The shadows, the porticoes, the filtration of light, the movable drawing of the lines of shadow. They are all elements that protect from the heat and mediate with the landscape, evoking the *monte alentejano* due to its position in the landscape, its yard and the landscape it discloses. Not the memory of the *monte alentejano* as a place to live in, but rather, and properly, as a place of work, as an agricultural structure. It is this industrial side that is established there. It is the agricultural machine, with its workers, its social dimension of work, and not the rural inhabitant that is present there, in the Herdade da Mitra of Vítor Figueiredo. And the whole system reflects or intends to reflect this condition. The practice of the possible works in that landscape. As a counterpoint, and therefore the need for them, the interior courtyards sketched on the unfinished north facade, which in the offices would give it a more convent-like, homely expression, and also of territorial administration, but in a different way.



Images 10, 11 and 12

III

What is Mitra? Herdade da Mitra, in Évora, is a technological centre of the University of Évora. It is set in the old facilities of the Agricultural Managers School created in 1931 that succeeded the Agricultural Practical School, which took place when the Herdade, the small convent and the palace went into the hands

of the State with the establishment of the Republic. After, of course, the extinction of the religious orders in 1834. The Herdade da Mitra, with about 268 hectares, was established in the beginning of the 16th century as "a farm and palace for the ecclesiastical chamber for resting and retreating" (Espanca, 1966,347). Afterwards "in the grounds of the farm a Capuchin convent named Bom Jesus" was founded by Cardinal D. Henrique in 1544. It was in this small two-floor convent that he hid inside the Bom Jesus de Valverde Chapel, a fact that excited Kubler and king Philip II of Spain so much.⁶

The palace was built first, around a walled courtyard-yard and had an entrance with a portico made of stone. It had a yard organized functionally according to its natural slope, with a magnificent large tree that is still there. In the lowest part, to the west, stood the agricultural quarters. The palace stood at the highest point, and, behind it, there was the Spring, the tank. "The tank is very particular. There were days when I went to Mitra and could not climb into the tank to see the tank"(Figueiredo, 1996). Seen from the outside, the tank looks like a crown. The oval windows look like loose elements that stand on a white wall made of layers of different thicknesses. Lines of shadow and light reflections. Next to the palace there is an independent flight of stairs leading to a balcony. From there, five steps and a wrought iron gate separate us from the tank, which is circular, about 30 meters in diameter. It has a wrought iron railing on the side facing the water, and outside, overlooking the landscape, there are seating areas topped by ovoid openings to frame the landscape on the railing, also in masonry about 90 centimetres high. We see the landscape twice.

Now open and infinite, then framed by the ovoid openings, finite and detailed. In the centre of the tank there is a life-size statue of Moses made of Estremoz marble. We have a dominant view over the horizon with the treetops. We see the walled green gardens of the water in the tank. Water brought by the aqueduct. From up here, dominating, looking at the East, the aqueduct draws an aerial but low geometry that connects the tank to the convent and then extends in the landscape of the cork oak forest, the same one that accompanies us at the

entrance of Herdade da Mitra to the intersection, where we turn left to visit the facilities designed by Vítor Figueiredo. The building was already there. It just needed to be drawn and built.

Portugal's entry into the EEC in 1986 (today EU) brought about tenders for everything, mainly regarding universities. Vítor Figueiredo (1929-2004), who had not much work in those days, made his tender with unusual complicity, which is different from a team.⁷ Almost an "encounter proper of a universal experience, from which we expect a rare or intimate impression...— a bit of ourselves" (Conrad, 1984, p. 13). Like those unique experiences that happened in the South Seas, according to Joseph Conrad (1857-1924). And that Rui Leão, at the time collaborating with Vítor Figueiredo, defined this way: "It is no longer us who make the Mitra, it is the Mitra that makes us" (Figueiredo, 1996). And then they put the phrase on the wall of the studio, along with others from Klee (1879-1940) or Orson Welles (1915-1985). And, in this complicity, they invented a set of relations between buildings for the Mitra Centre of the University of Évora. The tender had as its ambition "that these buildings already existed and then they moved a part of the university there" (Figueiredo, 1996). They won in 1990.

What is Mitra, if not the expression of man in that landscape, today as yesterday? It is not an artistic process, nor a cultural one, nor a result of melancholy. Not even vanity. It is a process of building and administering resources. That is its quality, that is its riddle, because its mystery is its conception. An atelier, a tender and a man. Vítor Figueiredo. He was born in Figueira da Foz in 1929. He graduated from ESBAP. He came to work in Lisbon, in Rua da Escola Politécnica. This was not his first project in the Alentejo. First a chapel in Albergaria dos Fusos, co-authored with Jorge Cruz Pinto (Vidigueira, 1960-). Out of this complicity came the trip to the Alentejo, as the photographs in the collection of Vítor Figueiredo attest.⁸ Later came the project for the Nossa Senhora dos Remédios Convent, on the way to Lisbon, at the gates of Évora, where the public graveyard of the city was created after the extinction of the religious orders.

How does one use a convent next to a graveyard was the question that underwent a troubled and long process that began in 1978 and ended in 2004, "developed" «to the point of paroxysm». The model of part of the porticoes of the patio, built in natural scale expanded polystyrene (...). In this model, he also tested small variations in shape, proportion, detail and modelling of light" (Pinto, 2004, p.10). Small vibrations like interrogations. Perhaps this is what keeps the buildings of Vítor Figueiredo in our memory. Not a clear image, not a clear form. More a feeling or a vibration of intelligence, or a revival of memories, like a text, like a brief poem that has nothing concrete, beyond the words printed and that reminds us of things. Like the gate into the Remédios Convent in granite, made of a single piece of granite on each side and a stone blade on top.

Its curve-and-counter curve section reminds us of the stone garrison of the Villa Moller door designed by Loos (1870-1933) in 1928 in Vienna, and yet, it is also there, in the Alentejo, at the gates of Évora. Memories and a refusal in the apparent authorship pushed to the limit. As in the Mitra, unfinished work that resists against the strong, rough and dry landscape of the South. There is a certain inevitability in the South. Be it in the South Seas (Conrad) or in South America (Borges) or in the Alentejo (Espanca). Where is the South? What is the South?

The South is a distance. An idea of the South. Of the Alentejo. Of this South. Each one has his South. This South is the Alentejo. The South is also the North of somewhere. From Lisbon, the South is also to the east, because the Tagus crosses the territory of Portugal diagonally. Alentejo. Beyond the Tagus. A geographical definition, more than a name. Beyond the Tagus, to north of the Algarve. The South is still a landscape to which one looks, and when one is in the South, one looks at where one came from, the path that was made. As in Vítor Figueiredo's architecture, if we look closely, it remakes itself.

The South is also the depth of the landscape. But not in perspective. It is a distance of events, out of any immediacy and training of a specialist. Maybe that's why it's so difficult, and rare, to paint a landscape from the South. Or draw a project. As Vítor Figueiredo noted, in a lecture, his astonishment that "master degree students, my God, you will have to believe me, but when I told them about Edgar Allan Poe, they did not know who he was" (Figueiredo, 1999). And if so, if they do not know, if they do not articulate information, then the South is indifferently equal to the North, the East and the West. Because there is no particularity and, without particularity, there is no contrast. Or detail. Or shadow. In the South, under the immense heat, an event is already a detail. The slightest possible movement, only the inevitable, is the way. As survival. Inevitable seems to be the work of Vítor Figueiredo in the Alentejo. Inevitable because it is complex, and happy because it is a survivor. Full because it is present, and mysterious because it is ambiguous.

Penknives, daggers and knives, and death as a setback at the end of the day, after the heat. One survives or not. It is the South. As Manuel da Fonseca (1911-1993), born in Santiago do Cacém wrote: "Drunk Maltese/miserable and terrible/shouting penknives!/ Paths of the Alentejo ..." (1984,134) is not uncommon even when it is not market day. The South is also the title of a short story by Jorge Luís Borges (1899-1986), born in Buenos Aires. He does not hesitate in saying that "nobody knows that the South begins on the other side of Rivadavia (...) and whoever crosses this street enters an older and harder world" (undated, 190) and it is so hard that the story ends with a struggle in which the hero "holds the knife firmly, which probably he does not know how to handle, and goes out to the plain" (Borges, undated, p. 196). Black humour, evasive conversations and mismatched complicity. Counter-field. "There are stories about the Alentejo that can only happen in the Alentejo. You ask someone, "Are you okay?"; "I could be worse", this is something, it is the refusal. The Alentejo has to do with it and maybe my

identity has to do with it; it is feeling, it is letting go, it is life "(Figueiredo, 1999), says Vítor Figueiredo about the Alentejo. In the South, in the Alentejo, there is something inevitable. Like the excess of sun, and the gloomy interior, out of necessity or counterpoint. This is also the Mitra of Vítor Figueiredo, when we see it from the road, on the *monte*. Inevitable, between the singing of the cicadas and the hum of the flies. It is more than what you see from there, than what is out there. A look out, a place to look out from, protected from the heat, out there.

Images 13, 14 and 15

Notes

1– When we speak of what Real means, we take into account the following definition by Rossi: “J’ai d’abord vu le réalisme comme une solution de rechange: il se opposait orgueilleusement à l’aspect gris et pénitentiaire de l’architecture moderne. (“Mais il est idiot - à moins que cela ne serve à quelque exercice académique — de faire du réalisme en architecture une catégorie“. ROSSI, Aldo (1977) - Education réaliste. L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui. Paris. No. 190, 1977, p.39.

2 – The film is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SMkWL6dLtFs>

3 – Kubler, 1988, p. 7: “Portuguese architects working in Portugal felt fascinated ... with the space possibilities of the wall itself, such as membrane, channel or passage, barrier, fence and, in general, as an obstacle or limit to be sought”.

4 – Especially in the newspaper *Público* and in the weekly newspaper *Expresso* on 21 May 1994, an article about the deficiencies of the work, about its stopping and the opinions of the specialists. On 27-05-1997 *Público* published an article about a petition regarding the works in the Mitra.

5 – It's the start, the first sentence, which opens the world of the Raised from the ground, a story that takes place in the Alentejo. By José Saramago.

6 – G. Kubler seems very enthusiastic about the Little Chapel of Bom Jesus de Valverde: Kubler, 1988, P. 47: “A chronicler of the eighteenth century says that Philip II, who visited the church in 1583, ordered that drawings, now lost, be made from it”.: And later on about the work of the Chapel (1988,49): “It seems that the greatest possible density of architectural form has

been reached without confusion, within a volume that does not exceed that of a sacristy or baptistery”.

7– Figueiredo, 1999: “It is not the work of collaborating with me, it was, in fact, a shared thing. (...) We celebrated with sparkling wine and had a party because, whether we won or lost, everything that had surrounded the tender, intensity, good things and bad things, tears, tensions, little tantrums, little annoyances, everything that constitutes Life, had been so intense that, for us, this event became necessary and continued during the making of the project.” (Figueiredo, 1999)

8 – The collection is kept in the Sacavém Fortress- SIPA.

How to quote this article: ASSIS, José Maria – The detail of the general project, the shadow: The polo da Mitra by Vítor Figueiredo. Estudo Prévio 9. Lisbon: CEACTION/UAL - Centro de Estudos de Arquitectura, Cidade e Território of Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa, 2015. ISSN: 2182-4339 [Available at: www.estudoprévio.net]

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Images

All images taken by José Maria Assis e Santos, except image 11, taken Inez Wijnhorst.

Image 1 - Polo da Mitra: East facade.

Image 2 - Polo da Mitra: Southern elevation and West.

Image 3 - Polo da Mitra: inner yard.

Image 4 - Polo da Mitra: inner atrium.

Image 5 - Polo da Mitra: outer galleries.

Image 6 - Polo da Mitra: view from the yard to the south.

Image 7- Polo da Mitra: covered passage.

Image 8 - Polo da Mitra: outer porticoes.

Image 9 - Polo da Mitra: outer porticoes.

Image 10 - Herdade da Mitra: watering tank, exterior view.

Image 11 - Herdade da Mitra: Watering tank, internal view.

Image 12 - Conventinho do Bom Jesus de Valverde. Chapel interior.

Image 13 - Évora. Convento dos Remédios. Acess.

Image 14 - Évora. Convento dos Remédios. Interior of the portico.

Image 15 - Évora. Convento dos Remédios. Inner patio.

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