

## Housing in S. João do Estoril. By way of descriptive and justificatory memory

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CALL FOR OBTAINING THE DIPLOMA OF ARCHITECT, SCHOOL OF FINE ARTS OF PORTO, CODA, Higher School of Fine Arts of Porto, 1959, 19 values (out of 20). FAUP/CDUA

### I

In October 1957, I was offered by a former architect fellow the possibility, in exchange for hourly remuneration, to carry out the project of a house for a friend of his; he had been asked for a "graceful" project, that later turned out to be a paid one.

I accepted to do it and I did it with all the joy of those who see the possibility of knowing that a work of their own could be built, with the joy that can be expected to find in someone who was not born with a silver spoon in the mouth, nor has rich or influential childhood friends, knows with deep certainty the total absence of perspectives that offers him a present and a foreseeable future.

It is with this project that I will take the exams to obtain the diploma of architect.

I do not present it to you as something beautiful and perhaps of good quality, held out on a silver platter to show how gifted one is; nor as something destined only to obtain a diploma.

I present my first professional work with the awareness of having given myself to it completely, while I built it on paper, and of continuing to live it today as an experience already accomplished.

## II

Evidently or not, the whole work had to contain within itself the history of the search made, of the groping walk of its creator, responsible because it is his total and current expression (in the sense of time existence), and not a semi-automatic repository of what has already been walked through.

Like any work, this one also has its own special references. By these references it is explained and, therefore, preferably to an exhaustive and uncharacteristic description of its elements, I propose to try to place it within them.

I awoke to, felt, and began to love architecture in the controversy verified by the abandonment of a language that, having historically played its role, was showing itself tired. I can say that I never consciously lived it or rehearsed it (obviously, I speak in the scholastic level) and only later I resolved on its bankruptcy, not because I simply found it outdated, but because the formal purism, the denial of any vaguely romantic expression, the search for denouncing principles of an era abstractly considered collectivist, the concern of a language that, to be current, would have forced international validity, presented themselves to me as already containing the germs of sterility.

If these reasons are too empirical, I will say, already in the realm of reason, that the rationalist attitude has arisen to me as a betrayal of the recipient of architecture — the man of today; the total man, situated and concrete, but committed as well. Revelation in the architecture of the fallen aristocratic distinction between elites and "masses", everyone forgetting that the masses were made up of men; erected in the name of reason and considering only objectively measurable needs — cubicage X, area Y, economy Z, etc., rationalism was bound to betray man, who is subjectivity beyond the volume of air he breathes and the square meters without which one dies. It is still a betrayal of the human when it proposes a metaphysical "criterion of reality" to a world that must deny itself the pretension of elaborating them — be they spiritualists or atheists, idealists, or materialists. We know only that man is a dynamic totality immersed in other dynamic totalities. Only one and the other must we meet and the relationships between them — in their past, in their present and in their future that is up to us to build — in their becoming, in short.

It is to this extent that I forcefully try to identify myself with those who, starting from the refusal of the cynical or forgotten ideality of rationalism, seek to establish a "path to the concrete", in the exchange of the abstract for the real and the consequent denial of a criterion that would define human reality once and for all, than with those are committed to the exchange of one "ism" for another more fashionable, because it will not be

legitimate, from the outset, to ask ourselves whether, in the name of these principles, one is not starting well insofar as one refuses, but often ends badly in that it is proposed?

To serve the real is not to totally reject the undeniable contributions of rationalism and the real asceticism that it means for architecture; it is to take a courageous position of search: restless in accepting that each theme has its own character, its specific problem, its own expression; it is to consider man in his human totality. A difficult position, undoubtedly, even a terrible one, in the constant demand for humility that it implies, as in the inner freedom it presupposes. And it is very difficult to escape the temptation of the absolute. It can be found both in the total refusal of a past in the name of abstractly formulated aspirations from an abstractly understood real, and in the total acceptance of that past by the unconditional acceptance of a present.

We can admit it that the first situation happened.

Today, with a little lucidity, is it not appropriate to ask ourselves whether, in the field of the proposal, a double betrayal has not been prepared in the name of this refusal, in the inability to accept the situation of what was created? There is talk of integrating man into a reality perhaps only defined from the past by the impotence of adding to it a perspective of a future man, which today cannot be conceived in a simplistic way.

If you want to integrate, you need to know what you want to integrate; you need to know what, what for, and what you're going to integrate into. It is therefore necessary, first of all, to be based on a tradition that must necessarily be inventoried and studied, under penalty of falling back into the vacuum of idealistic voluntarism; it is also necessary to know, but to know in fact, seriously and deeply, for whom houses are being built and not to make them for recipients who are supposed to be from Trás-os-Montes or Beira, without really knowing what being from there is all about; it is, finally and above all, to know what it is for: that man is not just a situated being; yet and more than anything [man is], a being in project, a committed being. Hence the request for a valid architecture, a conception of the world that necessarily will have to explain and justify it: in addition, we will necessarily resume a criterion of reality against one of experience (because the real will appear to us again as static, as reality: reality of Trás-os-Montes, and that one from Beira), an idealistic abstract against a concrete humanism. With a supplementary addiction that did not inform rationalism: inconsequence and confusion.

To today's architect, only a "criterion of experience" is licit; a criterion that does not refuse any data from reality — which, yes, exists, but only as a matter for essays, oriented for research, never for aprioristic and necessarily abstract solutions — and seek to serve and guide it, humbly, but with the certainty of not having made a mistake along the way.

### III

Like every project, this one had its characters: a technician, a client, and a land.

I set out to execute this project with a whole repository of tenuous desires to rehearse in a certain direction, a repository acquired in the school activity that, as an exercise, I struggled to live. I also went with the condition to execute it in month and a half. I know

today, as I sensed then, that this deadline was less than insufficient: it only allowed me, and at the expense of a total experience of work, to elaborate, refining, what was already intuited in me in the direction of the guideline that unconsciously seduced me. I was therefore denied the necessary time to reflect, and I was ultimately forced to accept it as an experiment to be carried out. I was denied the time to at least suffer the doubts and uncertainties of whether it was worth it or not, to place it in the field of objective and material experience.

I had a perception of "fragility" in the sense that the vertical plans were merely recessed in all horizontal elements; I accepted a certain exuberance, admitting the unviability of a humble silence by an "exuberant" client and a "curious" urbanization.

Today, having experienced the work, I admit to be evident in it a neoplastic sense, patent in the plants and encrypted in a set of more or less free plans, aimed at denying the volume by its reduction to a two-dimensionality; but, because I volumetrically refused a consequent encasement, preferring to play with juxtaposed plans, going to seek all the sense of volume to the balconies and roofs remarkably reinforced, and ultimately denying the roof the possibility of presenting itself as an element capable of imprinting a greater constructive reality and a sense of finitude, because I did not allow the significant vertical elements to be encased in it, I believe that in this divergence, or in the absence of a real proposal that would replace the accepted refusals, lies the reason for the "fragility" referred to above. I also stress that all this commitment, in its game of free plans, allowing a division "that does not create" space, forced me to a consequent fluidity in the external-internal spatial transition for which I did not have a minimum dimension in the external space. When in the design phase, I already had this perception, when trying to materialize the glass cloths using a tight mesh of frames.

I will list the specific constraints of the problem beginning and ending up with a civil engineer client with a magnificent attitude towards architecture and architects, but only outwardly, resulting from professional contacts. This attitude, however, did not make him ascend to the quality of client capable of establishing relationships with the architect, in such a way as to allow him to attempt a proposal of human content capable of poetics.

He did offer me the desire for an "abstract" villa, that is, a villa that is only a villa because it is in S. João do Estoril, in a crumb of land: it has a ballroom for the mundanity of its existence; a large storage room for furniture in the style his wife likes (although he is a conspicuous admirer of Japanese architecture); an apartment for a guard, predicting the possibility of trips; a room of 4,50 by 5 (measures given) for a Renaissance furniture, where he only eats when his social relations force him to, since he usually eats with his wife in the pantry; it has on the first floor a "windowless" storage for 2 closets and an office that is there to be room in a future commercial transaction already planned (if profitable enough).

He was also the builder of the work, keeping in it, in a perpetual state of drunkenness, a man he barely knew. He made several changes to the project, not only for a healthy spirit of economy, but also because (sic) he wanted to walk around the house naked and altered the office because his wife forced him to close with a door the books his books.



That's the story of the job. All that remains for me to say now is how much I miss this school and how grateful I am to leave it.

Lisbon, May 30, 1959.