

## The 25<sup>th</sup> of April and the architects

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### The 25<sup>th</sup> of April and the architects<sup>1</sup>

Two years after the of 25<sup>th</sup> of April revolution, the intention is not to talk about *faits divers*, but to understand the meaning of these events for the future of Portugal.

What characterizes this period is the spontaneous character of popular participation that took the form of direct democracy, first called Popular Power, then resumed in the Constitution, under the more restrictive expression of Local Power.

Thousands of people thus participated in public affairs, and the learning of democratic management passed through individual expression and mutual contestation that favored the formation of increasingly restricted decision – making groups – neighborhood councils were quickly replaced by street councils, which, around them, were supplanted by the building committees... This atomisation process had the positive aspect of allowing a precise identification of problems and finding concrete solutions. The moderate parties themselves were not able to prevent their militants from participating in the work of popular commissions. The parties that claimed a left-wing ideology thought, in their enthusiasm, that a "socialist" future could largely flow from a democratic organisation so widely founded on participation.

Not wishing to mythologize a process that failed to fully penetrate urban areas, or scattered rural ones, we must recognize that these actions allowed us to rediscover that forgotten or sometimes ignored gesture in Portugal: the vote.

Today, even though the practice of direct democracy, which allows one to delegate real powers to neighbors or co-workers, is losing speed, it survives the most serious crises.

In this general climate, what was the role of the intellectuals, the architects in particular?

### What architects?

As a liberal profession, the architects before the 25<sup>th</sup> of April enjoyed a relatively favorable position, thanks to the land speculation encouraged by Caetano's government, whose privileged instrument was the large agencies of architecture and urban planning.

Under these conditions, it is easy to understand that the 25<sup>th</sup> of April revolution was felt harshly by the most privileged of the group (the most committed to the regime), who were forced to a hasty escape to Brazil. For the others, who lost their main sources of income, with the disappearance of private orders, the situation became temporarily painful, as they waited for the public orders to catch their breath.

Many architects retained a certain nostalgia for their traditional positions, namely the group of technocratic architects who had benefited from the influence of the large study offices created for Caetano's prestigious projects. This nostalgia gradually became an active opposition to the new regime and translated into actions aimed at regaining their privileged situations.

But we prefer to dwell at greater length on those who have participated in the events of these two years, actively and in various forms, those who have tried to find a certain coherence between their practice and the political and social sense of the revolution. Some, like Teotónio Pereira, arrested before the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, fully committed themselves to political action and abandoned all practice to become revolutionary leaders.

Others, representing all generations, chose to intervene in the new administration, and often took important positions of responsibility, both at the governmental and municipal levels. Traditionally regarded as irresponsible "artists", architects were not accepted in the previous administration. Since the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, architects who had shown critical thinking or who were known for the experimental interest of their work, were called to sit next to "the politicians" and were able to solve the major problems of general interest.

Not wishing to make a value judgment on the results of the architects' action in power, we can note that they correspond more to individual strategies linked to certain left-wing forces than to an overall policy defined with the major parties.

However, the role of these architects was considerable, given the importance of the construction sector in the Portuguese economy.

The most notable personality called to the government as Secretary of State for Urbanism and Housing, was certainly Nuno Portas, an architect who for a long time was associated with Teotónio Pereira, a specialist in housing problems at the National Laboratory for Civil Engineering (LNEC) and professor at the Lisbon School of Architecture. His regular collaboration in the magazine *Arquitetura* and his critical positions on television about urban problems had already made him known before the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, both in Portugal and abroad. Portas, intervening on a broad left, called on the best Portuguese and foreign architects to support his action. He set himself the goal of combating land speculation by supporting the nationalization of banks and insurance

companies that held large land reserves, extending the freezing of rents, and setting standards that implied construction costs and controlled profit rates.

In the field of urbanism, Portas almost completely annulled the planning measures of the territory decided before the 25<sup>th</sup> of April (which had a certain negative effect on the equipment forecasts) and replaced them with limited programmes on reduced scales. Despite the authoritarian connotation of the actions of leftist governments, there was a real decentralization of decision-making power in terms of urbanism and construction. This fragmentation of power, which would have had positive effects from the perspective of a transformation from society to socialism, tends to favour a strong return to speculation.

Other programs launched by Portas, such as SAAL and the municipal workshops allowed, despite the discussions they were subject to, a closer relationship between the architect and the user inhabitant, as well as a new type of architectural practice.

The students played an important liaison role in the whole process, because they were, at the level of revolutionary struggles, the first to meet the inhabitants of the slums and shantytowns, and who then called in the architects who thought most capable of understanding the needs of the populations to intervene in the commissions. The financing of the teams of architects was done through the transfer of credits to prestigious operations of regional interest in the municipalities, for works carried out under their auspices. Some well-known architects, such as Vieira de Almeida, demonstrated a true civic commitment, leaving Lisbon to offer their services to the most isolated rural municipalities.

After two years, it is certainly difficult to draw up an objective balance of the results of the architects' action; however, we can already say that the inhabitants easily accepted the role of the architect in his technical specificity. On the other hand, they were often regarded as superfluous and patronizing when they first put their political and ideological "mission": in concrete practice, it was their quality as architects that was appreciated, even if the achievements were conducted on political bases. Under these conditions, architects were often forced to make a permanent critique of their own practices and adapt them to the new objective conditions.

### **What future?**

The future of the profession of architect in Portugal is directly linked to ongoing political and social developments, but it also depends on how architects exercise their role as occasional administrator and designers in interaction with their ideology. Now that mad hope has given way to a slightly short-sighted realism, we can predict a return to a professional practice quite like that which existed before the 25<sup>th</sup> of April. On the other hand, we can easily perceive the symptoms of a change imposed by the new relations with the European construction industrialists that are beginning to invest in Portugal, which means a strengthening of the power of technical study offices and a concentration of large architectural agencies that will become a simple extension of the industry.

Despite the internal contradictions and the diversity of professional and political positions that undermine the environment of architecture, we can discern the signs of a very acute



critical potential, but which, unfortunately does not yet translate into coherent, effective, and lucid actions. A large part of the professionals involved in programmes coming out from the 25<sup>th</sup> of April revolution were able to learn the lessons of an absorbing and difficult experience, but which also allowed them to glimpse new potentialities for a different professional practice and to prepare themselves to combat a likely return to the absurd practices imposed by the power.

Two years have passed. It is difficult at the present time to recognize the strong and joyful atmosphere that presided over the birth of a revolution aimed at the disadvantaged. The internal and external difficulties that the country faces take us back to ancient Portugal. But we have not lost hope, briefly, of a more just society, here or anywhere in Europe, in which an architectural practice regenerated by popular participation would be possible. History falls asleep, to come back even stronger.

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<sup>1</sup> For editorial reasons, the images accompanying this text are not published.