

Arquitectura Popular em Portugal¹

Miguel Judas

m@migueljudas.com

Architect, PhD student in the Department of Architecture of the Autonomous University of Lisbon (DA/UAL), Portugal

To cite this review: JUDAS, Miguel - Arquitectura Popular em Portugal. **Estudo Prévio** 20. Lisboa: CEACT/UAL-Center for Studies of Architecture, City and Territory of the Autonomous University de Lisboa, 2021, p. 129-133. ISSN: 2182-4339 [Available in: www.estudoprevio.net]. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26619/2182-4339/20.02>

Review received on 29 June 2022 and accepted for publication on 1 July 2022.

Creative Commons, CC BY-4.0 license: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

"Constraints and solutions are inseparable aspects in regional architecture (...) The phenomenon is common, moreover, to all different regions of the country and the world. Nor would the restriction imposed on the noun "architecture" with the adjective "regional" make sense otherwise. This restriction involves territorial limits, but at the same time an intimate relationship with the natural factors and those of human intervention that have materialized one region and distinguish it from others"².

If we just take a glance at the six chapters of "Arquitectura Popular em Portugal" today, 61 years after its 1st edition, we will tend not to find in them more than images of a vanished country, which eventually arouse nothing but nostalgia. Another slightly more attentive look will at least lead us to retain the forms of the constructed recorded in black and white photographs. But it is possible yet another one, necessarily more time consuming because immersed in reading, which allows us to rediscover architecture as a synthesis of a concrete reality, fruit of the accommodating of the territory by man. Or even, (re) finding in architecture, as a discipline, the ability to cast a singular look at reality, to show it and transform it.

The approximately 700 pages in which the "Survey of Regional Architecture in Portugal" was synthesized, conducted between 1955 and 1960, are an inventory, or one of the possible inventories, which resulted from a fieldwork that involved "... three months of wandering ... about 50,000 kilometers, by car, by scooter, on horseback and on foot (...) in hundreds and hundreds of villages (...), about 10,000 photographs, hundreds of drawings and surveys, and (...) thousands of written notes" (Arquitectura Popular em Portugal. 2004, p. XX). The record is divided into six chapters that

correspond to the subdivision of mainland Portugal into zones: Minho, Trás-os-Montes, Beiras, Extremadura, Alentejo and Algarve. The designations, although echoing the nomenclature of the provinces of mainland Portugal established by *Estado Novo*, were due to the demarcation of the fieldwork sphere of each of the teams involved in the survey. The option, explained in the Introduction, was the result of a search for equity in the effort required of each of the teams "... within a certain regional unit" (p. XXIV), to the detriment of a strict geographical delimitation. The apparent yielding to pragmatism that imposed the "... somewhat arbitrary number..." of zones, without precise limits, nevertheless sought to be compensated in favor of the unity of the whole by "... a previous work of utmost importance: the definition of guidelines to ensure the unity of study elements". And it will still be the same pragmatism that before the source of information collected will have led to that "... each group to treat its Zone without an absolute rigidity of common ordering." This explains the simultaneous transversality of the themes with which the pertinence of architectures, settlement and the buildings is informed – such as geology, climate, economy – and heterogeneity in the way they are valued and presented. A heterogeneity that will have resulted from the intersection of the idiosyncrasies of each of the teams and the landscape with which they were confronted. But if the construction of narratives is different from each other, the whole is united by the texts "... without excessive erudition, nor exaggerations of detail" (p. XXIV-XXV), as well as by the normalization of the graphic elements that accompany them, thematically similar, among which stands out for its strict homogeneity the presentation in two pages, along with of the types of the building identified in each zone and its mapping. The care in more than recording, informing, and showing, is constant. This results not in a book of architects for architects, but of architects for whomever is interested in architecture.

If the six chapters of the main part are, in themselves and overall, a remarkable record for their ability to show architecture because of the ancestral process of anthropization of the territory, what precedes it is still relevant for what, successively, reveals to us, particularly if read in reverse sequence.

First, the remarkable Introduction, which we mentioned above in a free and diffuse way, and which extrases a mere exdisplay of objectives, contents, methods, and contingencies of the research, to affirm the critical eye of those who undertook it on their time. If the object of research is architecture, it is not only on architecture that the gaze is cast. The authors have even taken care to point this out through the fact that the work results in "...a distortion of the real aspect and the living conditions of the villages, in which not everything is exemplary. Of poverty, abandonment, and unhealthiness, so characteristic of many of our villages and places, there is no evidence in this book; and we could blame ourselves for falsifying an undeniable reality" (p. XXV).

Then, the curious transcription of Decree-Law No. 40 349, which enables the conduct of the Inquiry by ensuring its financing by the government, for which it allows us to know about the circumstances in which it takes place and the relationship between *Estado Novo* and those who propose and carry it out. On the one hand, there is the financing using funds from the Unemployment Fund and the discipline of validating expenditure that is imposed; on the other hand, there is the curious transcription of the diploma on an even page.

Or, even, the successive prefaces, where the transformation is revealed at the hands of the time of the look on the work of those who take the initiative to re-edit it. Also, on the role of some of those who undertook it, especially Keil do Amaral.

The realization of the "Survey of Regional Architecture in Portugal", and its subsequent publication, is to its date a sign of the already long debate around architecture as an identity manifestation, as an expression in the nation. The questions and discussions had gained expression during the 19th century, driven by the tensions generated by a changing world and its repercussions in the country – between enthusiasm and skepticism for the emergence of this new world, powered by coal, which lights up first on gas and later electricity. Emerging either from the impetus of creating a new Portugal, or from the counter-renitence in giving up the old, or even the awareness of the elites, eminently urban, that the rural country remained undiscovered. The questioning was broad in spectrum: political, cultural, and artistic. A context in which interest in popular art grows, because it is seen as closely linked to the "mother land" and thus as the most genuine repository of nationality or "portugality", feeding ethnological explorations to know and record the "Portuguese way of life"; the phenomenon aligns itself with the generality of the European landscape.

Architecture would echo these questions, while struggling with the challenge of new programs (such as the new public equipment or the income-generating buildings), expressing itself first in the recovery of revivalist formulations of erudite roots, such as neomanueline or neo-Romanesque, of which the façade of Rossio Station, by José Luís Monteiro, is an example, and then gradually approaching models of local rurality, as the House of Ricardo Severo, in Oporto. The route is made as if in a centripetal movement, from the celebration of the imperial country of the Manueline towards the mythified rural roots of nationality. After all, being Manueline late Gothic, it was, like the Romanesque, a reproduction of European models, external to the specificity of the nation and the ideology of national identity.

Upon entering the 20th century, two visions, or paths, became clearer. The main protagonists were the then-established Miguel Ventura Terra (1866-1919) and the young Raúl Lino (1879-1974). The former, of Parisian education, *Beaux-Arts*, proposing a progressive attitude, an architecture aligned with the possibilities of technical novelties and formal and typological explorations of that time, cosmopolitan and urban; the latter, of British and Germanic education, adopting a culturalist position, exploring the reinvention of architecture from the resumption of its local specificities, tradition, preferably of rural character. The diversity of proposals directly confronted each other in 1900 in the competition for the Portugal pavilion at the Paris International Exhibition. And if Ventura Terra won the contest, Raul Lino's proposal deserved the appreciation of many and assured him public recognition that allowed him to increase his influence, thus ensuring the persistence of the debate and divergence.

If the expression "Casa Portuguesa" begins by locating and synthesizing this identity questioning, it will end up being distorted by the misappropriation of the reflection that Raul Lino undertook and published about the theme in the first third of the century, exploring the same designation: "A Casa Portuguesa " (1929), "Casas Portuguesas: Alguns apontamentos sobre o architectar das casas simples" (1933). The simplistic reading of the works by the public, as a formal catalogue, and the coincidence of the regime's nationalist drive during the 1930s, would play an important role in ceasing its

openness to modernist experiences, aligned with the functionalism and rationalism that came from Europe. A change of course in which Raul Lino would not steal from the rest to play an active role.

In the following decade, the regime's self-esteem collided with the end of World War II and its consequences in the political, economic, social, and cultural fields. If the regime survives politically, however, its relationship with the social fabric changes. In this, emerges a climate of cultural agitation that will translate into the affirmation of neorealism and the emergence of organized movements. In the field of architecture, in 1946, ICAT (Cultural Initiatives, Art and Technique) was founded in Lisbon, which became committed to the renovation of the journal "Architecture", making it a platform for the dissemination of the work of young architects and fundamental authors of the Modern Movement. In 1947, came ODAM (Organization of Modern Architects), in Oporto, THAT clearly assumed its alignment with the Modern Movement and committed to reflection around its doctrine. The convergence between the two will be expressed at the architects' congress of 1948 and will sustain the renewal of the Architects' Union by the election of Francisco Keil do Amaral (1910-1975) as president.

It was in this context that the young Fernando Távora (1923-2005) published in 1947 the final version of " O problema da casa portuguesa", a text in which he focuses incisively *on the status quo* and in which he resumes the identity issue, crying out for a "... study of Portuguese architecture, or construction in Portugal..."³, rising against the mere exploration of the picturesque and isolationism: "It is not fair or reasonable that we close ourselves, in a sought-after ignorance, to the works of today's great masters, to the new construction processes, to an entire Architecture that arises full of vitality and strength"⁴.

In the same year, Keil do Amaral, launched a similar challenge, appealing to the realization of "A necessary initiative" in the pages of the journal "Architecture":

"... collecting and classifying peculiar elements of Portuguese architecture in the different regions of the country, with a view to publishing a book, broadly and carefully documented, where students and construction technicians could find the basis for honest, living, and healthy regionalism. Just like this: honest, living, and healthy."⁵

Accentuating, in his lively and singular style, the tone of criticism:

"... do we really not possess more pure and coherent sources for the formation of a modern Portuguese architecture, than our façade regionalists... would have us believe?"⁶

It will be the same Keil do Amaral that, at the head of the union, would fight for almost a decade until, at the end of 1955, he managed to make viable what would be designated as inquiry and the publication of the book we discuss here. In the meantime, however, there was a change in the context, where conservatism that imposed a "national architecture"⁷ and the simplistic derivation of the Modern Movement vulgarized as "International Style" coexisted. This would add to the purpose of overcoming the embarrassment created by the mythology of the "Portuguese House", the possibility of reconsidering the paths of the Modern Movement from a culturalist approach of local roots.

As Nuno Teotónio Pereira would summarize decades later in the Journal *Arquitectos*⁸,



the conduct of the survey, and its publication, would serve four purposes: "A record of a Vanished Portugal"; "The Real Proof against the so-called Portuguese Architecture"; "The Critical Review of the Dogmatics of the Modern Movement"; and "The extension of the Concept of Heritage" — beyond the "... scholarly, singular monument...".

"Arquitectura Popular em Portugal", tends to be seen today as a monument, either because of the time it takes us away from the lost country it recorded, or its association with the paths that Portuguese architecture would follow its publication. However, at the present time, when we are impelled to relearn how to work with nature, it offers us materials to understand how to do it and is a testimony "... of the need to combat preconceived ideas and narrow concepts" — as Nuno Teotónio Pereira wrote⁹.

¹ A edição da obra utilizada nesta recensão é a seguinte: **Arquitectura Popular em Portugal**. 4.^a edição. Lisboa: Ordem dos Arquitectos, 2004.

² Op. Cit. P.261

³ Távora, Fernando – O problema da casa portuguesa. **Teoria e crítica de arquitectura – Século XX**, Lisboa: Ordem dos Arquitectos, 2010, p. 327.

⁴ Idem, p. 328.

⁵ Keil do Amaral, Francisco – Uma iniciativa necessária. **Teoria e crítica de arquitectura – Século XX**, Lisboa: Ordem dos Arquitectos, 2010, p. 329

⁶ Idem, p. 328.

⁷ As Nuno Teotónio Pereira calls it, in *A Arquitectura do Regime, 1938-1948*. **Portugal: Arquitectura do Século XX**, Munique, New York: Prestel, 1997, p. 34.

⁸ PEREIRA, Nuno Teotónio - Reflexos Culturais do Inquérito à Arquitectura Regional. **Jornal dos Arquitectos**, n.º 195, 2000, p. 69-71.

⁹ Idem, p. 71.