

Some good man



Universidade Lusíada de Lisboa. Portugal

Some examples of exemplary practice by Portuguese architects in the 70s

Obliviousness - In contemporary European society the challenge facing the old professions is of crucial importance. Not only how they will be transformed by the new ones but also their search for a new definition and a re-evaluation of their roles in an ever-changing reality. The question of this role and how to play it is the principal question facing the architectural profession as it confronts its future.

This is not the time to be investigating intelligent design or technological development for intelligent buildings. In the 70s we believed that those technological wonders would solve all of our problems. Then in the 80s we started to discover not only the new problems we had invented but also the new technologies and wonders of new processes to solve our problems and save us again. Now we have to understand that we need to change behavior, to rethink social, ethical and professional values, and to accept the wonderful qualities of human beings and their intelligence rather than to be continually seeking new technological systems and miracle solutions. These are wonderful, and we have them, but it is us who are the problem, not the systems we invent. So it is a vital time for an urgent review of the role of man (on this planet, at least for the time being), to re-organize societies, reevaluate priorities and to regain the true social meaning, responsibilities and ethical dimension of the professions.

This applies to the role of architects and architecture in its cultural and social aspects as well as a major ethical obligation that can balance its practical principals and manage the weighting of politics, finance and economics with the social, cultural and poetic aspects of design. And all of this has to start in architectural schools with an awareness of a new kind of professional dialogue and the need to reinstate strong values and meanings.

This presentation is about this concern and to debate the idea of a new beginning, a restart: a reevaluation of things in the profession that have come to be undervalued or ignored with the loss of the memory of the long history of architecture and the profound social meanings and its human values that must always remain an intrinsic part of it.

Awareness – Between the 1950s and the 1970s social housing was a major concern in Portugal, principally in the two major cities, Lisbon and Porto. After a historic first congress of architects in 1948 some younger ones, under the leadership of others with more experience, travelled from the north to the south of the country in order to discover the true vernacular of Portuguese architecture and to expose the lies of the regime and the reality of a people in need of modern democratic solutions and economic housing programmes. This quest formed the poetic base amongst the architects of the time of social housing as a basis of both duty and hope, a concept that survived up to the beginning of the 80s. The very best of a generation of architects, along with urban planners, geographers and sociologists, made some of the best social housing projects either as a poetic anti-regime fight for democracy and progress before the Carnation Revolution of 1974 or as seekers for freedom under the auspices of revolutionary housing associations intent of building a democratic society based on social awareness and justice.

Under rigid legislation that left no room for poetic options or cultural freedom, these young architects had to create projects from almost nothing, creativity being treated as a superfluity and

quality unnecessary when considering the rights of the poorest in society. But these architects' sense of duty, their ethical values, and their understanding of the importance of their craft to society led to some of the most beautiful projects of contemporary Portuguese architecture. And looking at them now in context we can see the intelligence of their solutions, the cleverness of their decisions and their architectural language, the way they rose to the urban challenge and also their social and human values – the real beauty of architecture.

For our debate I will be showing you two of these projects – *Cinco Dedos* by Vitor Figueiredo and *Bouça* by Álvaro Siza.



CINCO DEDOS – Vitor Figueiredo - Chelas, Lisbon, 1971

foto Vitor Figueiredo archive



foto Ricardo Zuquete

Just before the revolution of 74, in a fragment of a revolutionary urban proposal, this project of five towers organized the site on a huge scale and with the Five Fingers project (*Cinco Dedos*) Vitor Figueiredo showed himself to be the Portuguese master of social housing in the sensitivity and intelligence of his projects. Throughout his professional life he sought to overcome poverty and his life as an architect was, like no other, dedicated to this end.

At the time the middle classes lived in the new avenues of Lisbon in elegant modern towers that illustrated the dream of a cosmopolitan city. The challenge was to do the same in social housing in order to make this dream a democratic reality. For the majority of the inhabitants this would be their first proper flat, having lived in shanty-towns before. Due to the impossibility of knowing exactly who the new inhabitants were to be Figueiredo made some experiments in typology.

During a long investigation I visited almost all the apartments that were in their original condition. The experiments in typology had allowed families to diversify in the way they occupied the flats over the past thirty years, a fact of great significance for the families.



foto Roberto Callava
A. Siza archive



BOUÇA Álvaro Siza Porto 1974/75

foto Ricardo Zuquete

Just after the 1974 revolution a movement to promote social housing called SAAL (Ambulatory Local Support Service) was formed. This was an intelligent, radical and ideologically-based group with all the good intentions and fragility inherent in the revolutionary process. One of its main ideas was that the poor had the right to live in the centre of the best cities. Since the 19th century the poor of Porto had occupied vacant lots in the urban centre where they had built shanty-town neighbourhoods called “islands”. In 1974 they formed a residents’ group and invited the young Álvaro Siza to draw up plans for a new “island”. And so he did, in a participatory process and using only the materials available, as the factories were closed. With a sense of scale and connecting walkways that respected the site’s autonomy while connecting it with the city through a series of courtyards. The outside public areas were to be defined by the rituals of daily life and the labyrinth of dwellings were arranged in long galleries with the beauty of scale and the repetition of simple or even poor design elements. I visited every house in the original project and had extremely revealing conversations with the inhabitants about their houses, the architecture and their “island”. Many knew nothing about architecture and some were illiterate and unschooled, but they taught me impressive lessons. Only a small part of the original project was built at the time but in 2006 it was completed and new life and people came to the “island” as the site was connected to the buildings of Boavista and thus to the rest of the city. In this way a new and complete “island” became an even more important reference both in Porto and to Portuguese and international contemporary architecture, confirming that sometimes revolutionary good intentions can be indispensable.

*There are men who fight one day and are good.
There are men who fight one year and are better.
There are some who fight many years and they are better still.
But there are some that fight their whole lives,
those are the ones that are indispensable.*

Bertolt Brecht

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