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AN UNUSUAL JOURNEY THROUGH POST-WAR RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE

Maria Tavares

Faculdade de Arquitetura e Artes da Universidade Lusíada Norte / Centro de Investigação em Território; Arquitetura e Design, Rua da Junqueira, 188-198, 1349-001 Lisboa, Portugal; mariatavares.arq@gmail.com

ABSTRACT.

In September and October 1958, Nuno Teotónio Pereira and Nuno Portas embarked on a trip through Europe with the aim of coming into contact with different experiences in the area of housing. Spain and Italy were the recipients of short visits that sought to understand the social and economic structure in the post-World War II period and the responses of the various bodies responsible for the housing sector.

In a decade marked by new paths being taken by architects committed to a process of social transformation, these two Portuguese architects, faced with the housing deficit that was making itself felt in Portugal, brought back from this journey a number of modern references that inevitably were transformed into a kind of script to be put into practice, though also with an inevitable critical (re)vision.

In Portugal, so-called low-cost housing (HE or *Habitacões Económicas*) had been using monies from the Federation of Social Security Funds to build “low-income housing” since 1947. In Italy, the main objective of the INA-Casa programme, which commenced in 1949, was to combat unemployment through construction.

Of interest here is not just the more operational side of the cases, but also to understand how low-cost housing, through the teachings of the aforementioned duo of architects, came to methodologically apply the principles of the Italian body, mainly by means of the similar impulses coming from a new generation that was motivated to experiment with renewed architecture that remained close to and was easily understood by the popular classes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Between 1946 and 1972, the debate around State-subsidized residential architecture in Portugal reached a level of unusual activity, not only for the product itself but also because of the methodological tools that supported new production dynamics. The architects of this generation were the main ones responsible for these new dynamics, finding peculiar ways to approach the architectural production practiced in Europe.

However, if it is true that the author's work was strongly recognized, it is also true that it was not unrelated to State entities that helped support the renewed energy of architects.

This paper proposes to revisit a trip that Nuno Teotónio Pereira and Nuno Portas made in Europe in search of new experiences in the area of housing. It intends to convene and recognize the teachings that the two architects bring from their journey, through the possibility that so-called low-cost housing (HE or *Habitacões Económicas*), as a State-body dedicated to low-income housing, has provided them.

Initially, the purpose of the formation of HE is present in the middle of an enormous housing deficit as well the dominant role of Nuno Teotónio Pereira. Later, the paper focuses on the possibility of the trip, introducing the crucial figure of Nuno Portas as the promoter for the journey. Finally, INA-Casa, the Italian entity, is introduced, and affinities with HE are present according to operative categories that will show us a new reality practiced by the 2 Portuguese architects from then on.

2. HOUSING: A PURPOSE FOR THE STATE AND ARCHITECTS.

Some streets in Lisbon's Avenidas Novas district have seen the construction of large rental apartment buildings, and indeed some are still being built, that are aligned in terms of their exterior aspect with the proposals of classical architecture. They are buildings that aimed at least at being well built; indeed, they also offer modern conveniences. Well aired and exposed to the sun, with heating in winter, a lift, a service stairway, independent accommodation for housekeeping staff, one could easily call them luxury buildings. The rent, however, (...), which is well beyond the possibilities of each of us, has given rise to the most heated discussions and acerbic protests.¹

In a text published in the magazine *A Arquitectura Portuguesa* in 1945, the author did not hold back; he manifested his total despondency at the type of construction that private entities were carrying out in Lisbon. He entitled his short text *A Problem*, demonstrated total concern about the need for change in how the housing problem was dealt with. This short episode led to the appreciation of the *utilitarian* dwelling, i.e., that which, whilst not luxurious, received State subsidies and emerged as a response to the problem(s) that had been exposed.

Three months before publication of the short text, the Portuguese Parliament had approved the Law on Low-Income Housing. Apartment buildings of four storeys emerged as an alternative to the original programme of the *Estado Novo* regime, but private initiative did not react particularly enthusiastically to the appeal to cooperate in the new build-

ing programme.

Accordingly, 1946 saw a new effort on the part of the State to seek solutions that would provide more alternatives for achieving the goal of increasing housing in Portugal. Given the post-war context and the evident need for a review of the conditions proposed one year earlier by the law² that paved the way for "low-income housing", a Decree-Law³, the strategic starting point for which was the Social Security Funds providing the financing for solving the housing problem.

Thus emerged, in June that same year, the low-cost housing programme known as HE, which was financed by the Federation of Social Security Funds, as a contribution to boosting low-cost housing through the application of the Social Security fund institutions' capital in the construction of "low-income housing".

The programme's field of action was very wide. At the territorial level, it was spread throughout the whole of the Portuguese national territory. In operational terms, it was responsible for practically all construction phases: from the planning to total and complete execution, including the financing. At the social level, it covered a considerable section of the Portuguese population, through the beneficiaries of the funds in the federation and the full-time members of the "People's Houses" [*Casas do Povo* or community-based social institutions].

The first phase of the process, which was implemented gradually over a period of time, focused mainly on the financing, given the readiness of the resources. But within a few years, the ambition of the project and the goal of controlling all works phases, gave the HE-programme a leading position in the construction and promotion of low-cost housing in Portugal. Through the then still young architect, Nuno Teotónio Pereira, who from early on had embraced the cause of housing for the greatest number of people, the HE low-cost housing programme gained new stimulus. As the only architect working on the programme during its first 10 years, his role within the body was important, building an image which, while overtly avoiding the official canons and their standardised designs, sought from the outset to respond in design terms to the principles of social commitment, in an effort to find a relationship with the context, the roots and the users.⁴ The concentration of efforts with a view to coming together to resolve the housing problem in Portugal seemed to be establishing a common theme.⁵

3. A GUARANTEED OPPORTUNITY

In a notification date December 1958 to the Technical Department at HE, Nuno Teotónio Pereira showed an interest in submitting a report on a recent visit to housing experiments outside the national context:

In September and October of this year, I had the opportunity, in the course of quick visits to Spain and Italy, to come

into contact with a number of housing projects carried out in those countries.

Given that many of said projects appear to be of interest to us, I have drawn up a short report, (...) made with a two-fold objective: to convey to the [HE] Federation what I think was most interesting and to call attention to the convenience of studying, with a certain degree of detail, the projects executed in these two countries, which have considerable geographic, cultural and social affinities with our own.⁶

The visit, which took place in September and October of 1958, featured the important presence of Nuno Portas, who, as a recent addition to Nuno Teotónio Pereira's firm, and having in-depth knowledge of the reality beyond Portugal, sought to encourage his boss to make the journey. The young architect, who was somewhat restless and intellectually curious, had begun early on to look into the issue of collective, low-cost housing as part of a commitment to the population and those for whom he worked in his professional life.⁷ Participation was the word of the day, and housing for the people was the main object of all investigation.⁸

The journey would thus give him the opportunity to become acquainted first hand with the experiments he had been analysing judiciously in the international magazines that came into the hands of Portuguese architects. Portas compiled a complete itinerary, including short individual files on each project, with a description of the neighbourhoods and the experiments to be visited. The result was a meticulous process of searching for innovative proposals.

The two architects left on their European journey with the aim of coming into contact with different experiments in the field of housing programmes and new architectures. Spain and Italy were the scene of short visits in an effort to understand the social and economic structure in the post-war period and the responses of the bodies with responsibilities for the housing sector.

While the journey across Spain was kept short, as the country was to be the object of future journeys, the main objective was to get to know the social and design realities in Italy, as promoted by the experimentation carried out by INA-Casa, the Italian counterpart to HE. These projects were regarded as fertile ground for design experimentation, that was very centred on the cell, the access systems and consolidating the urban composition.

The visit to Italy took 10 days, covering mainly the north of the country: Genoa, Alessandria, Piacenza, Parma, Reggio Emilia, Bologna, Florence, Forli, Cesena, Rimini, Ravenna, Mestre and Venice. On the way back they stopped in Milan and Turin.

But why the great interest in INA-Casa as a body and the architecture it produced, which was to assert itself in all of Italy? For Nuno Teotónio Pereira, as a specialist with a considerably important role in INA-Casa Portuguese counterpart, the interest was in understanding the analogies between the two structures, both in terms of the response to

the considerable housing deficit that was felt in both countries and the need to put into practice a new vocabulary that was heralded in by the architecture of this housing programme.

4. INA-CASA AND THE SOCIAL EMERGENCY

INA-Casa, the short form for *Istituto Nazionale de Assicurazione-Casa*, which was set up in February 1949, was a governmental body set up to execute a plan to increase unskilled worker employment. It was carried out for two periods of 7 years each, with a three-fold objective: to stimulate Italian economic growth by means of the investment of capital in the construction industry; to combat the high unemployment rate through construction projects that used local labour, materials and technologies; and to reduce the country's housing deficit.

The plan, known as the Fanfani Plan in honour of the Italian Labour Minister, Amintori Fanfani, whose idea it was, was essentially a legislative instrument that specifically built houses for the working classes, answering directly to the Ministry of Labour. The aim was to create an independent structure that spurned a concentration of bureaucracy, thus resulting in a slender and highly centralised structure. It made use of regional bodies that already existed, thus managing to cover the whole of Italian territory and contributing to the effectiveness and speed of execution.

As far as design of the dwellings was concerned, INA-Casa made use of freelance professionals, applying a competition system that proved to be a great opportunity for a new generation to practice on a large scale "an idiom of renewed communication with the working classes".⁹

More than one-third of Italian architects were actively involved in his housing programme, who, under the coordination of a centralised architectural office, examined the plots of land, controlled the design projects and the work sites. Taking care to weave new ideas into the various historic fabrics, they dedicated themselves to "protecting the cultural specificity of the communities to be rehoused, and also the cultural identity of the architectural image".¹⁰

There was a negative reaction to the hypothesis of using standardised designs, whilst allowing for the advantages of unified construction elements, to the benefit of the creation of a kind of album of designers.¹¹

In the 14 years of the programme, more than 300,000 dwellings were built, distributed throughout hundreds of urban interventions. It functioned as an experimental laboratory, seeking an approximation to the popular imaginary while applying "a simplified building and linguistic lexicon that was capable of representing the new urban communities and identifying a possible point of contact between modernity and context".¹²

The proposals extended beyond the houses, taking in significant areas of land and providing the whole structure necessary for diverse collective functions.¹³ Given the densi-

ty of some of the ideas, the projects were distributed amongst different designers¹⁴, thus constituting a wealth of different approaches from the formal and construction points of view.

According to Nuno Teotónio Pereira, it was in the urbanistic aspect that these projects became examples of great interest — from the small nuclei to the large neighbourhoods. Architecture of truly social significance worked, in his opinion, in the relationship between the distribution of the buildings and the exterior spaces with a heightened organic, structured and hierarchised character.

The two architects brought back to Portugal a number of working references. Nuno Portas, the editor-in-chief of the forward-looking magazine, *Arquitectura*, devoted himself to critiquing and disseminating the Italian experiments, enriching the Portuguese cultural scene. His collaboration at Nuno Teotónio Pereira's firm marked the beginning of a new process of formal enrichment that called the functionalist dogmas into question. He absorbed the necessary sources to initiate and give structure to new ideas, proceeding from experiments already formalised by his colleague.

The HE-programme at the time of the trip was not only in a phase of growth but was also undergoing great structural change. The visit as a learning experience confirmed some of the achievements already reached, but also positioned the interests anew as one was about to enter a new phase of design that was announcing itself.

5. CROSS INFLUENCES AND AFFINITIES

Nuno Teotónio Pereira reflected on the important analogies with the HE programme. It was time to create a new framework of models and motivations to be implemented. The affinities were clear.

5-1. A highly centralised structure:

The Portuguese body, which answered to the then Ministry of Corporations and Social Security, formalised the HE-programme and set up a technical team capable of responding effectively to the housing problem through the construction of "low-income housing", using funding from the Social Security Funds. Both bodies played a central, coordinating role, based in Lisbon (HE) and Rome (INA-Casa), from where they contacted with other smaller regional support structures. In the Portuguese case, these were the local governments and the network of regional architects; in Italy, it was the already existing regional bodies;

5-2. A work front on a national scale:

In contrast to other small plans aimed at problems that arose because of the housing deficit in specific contexts, the two bodies worked on a nationwide scale. The projects were ambitious, but nevertheless were able to cover all of the national territory;

5-3. An administrative and bureaucratic apparatus that was pared back to a minimum:

Both bodies had the objective of shunning large bureaucratic structures. The whole system of commissioning and managing a work was either the responsibility of the central services or based on direct commissioning (HE) or competitions (INA-Casa);

5-4. An advisory technical committee:

Despite the fact that HE did not have an official advisory technical committee until 1958, with all the work being carried out by Nuno Teotónio Pereira himself, the Studies and Projects Office was set up after the trip to Italy with the aim of studying and consolidating modes of operation in executing a project (from the large-scale urban complex to the functional specialisation of the dwelling and to construction methods);

5-5. A young and dynamic team:

Having technical departments that were, to varying degrees, limited in size but growing, both bodies allowed for the creation of a type of internal architectural office. In the HE case, it fed off young dynamic architects who were anxious to experiment with new forms of spatial organisation, as well as to achieve new feats in the field of research into the house or dwelling. In addition to the internal architectural office, the design projects were commissioned from freelance professionals, most of whom were also young, making it possible to distribute throughout the national territory architects who were best acquainted with the context in which they were to intervene. In both cases, the quality of the output came from the active participation of these professionals who, given the need to respond to the sheer number of projects designs requested, did not accept a lack of quality of said projects, instead basing them closely on the cultural realities and specific needs of the population to be housed and responding to the ongoing economic restrictions; for these reasons they rejected standardised designs;

5-6. A diverse functional programme:

One prerequisite for the architecture being approached in a truly social way was that the complex to be built included not only housing but also an array of other complementary functions. Whilst this issue was always taken into consideration in the Italian designs, in Portugal not always were such stipulations met. Indeed, the cases where the ideas did go ahead were few and far between, regardless of the architects' interest and desires. Financial issues, on the one hand, and the use of synergies in the urban context, on the other, in order to avoid duplication of functions, were the reasons found for this circumstance;

5-7. A formal import based around empathy:

Associated with the functional programme of the complex and the dwelling, where yards were sympathetically

treated as common public spaces in projects in urban areas, or spaces for the private cultivation of crops close to the houses in rural areas, a new lexicon began to transform the contexts of integration of the housing complexes. Concurrently with the assessment of what was going on internationally, there was real interest in the national reality and the imaginary that came from popular architecture. There was a desire to communicate through the architectural detail, which came close to and was understandable to the lower classes.

New housing schemes were experimented with, committing to programmatic simplification through concentration of the functions in a centralised nucleus that became the main space in domestic life; this was frequently applied in vernacular situations, but also in the urban context. Accesses also took on a particular expression, in recognition of the commitment to freeing them from the built complex, so that the movement of the residents could play a stimulating role in the social life. This was a process that translated a certain degree of complexity if one focuses merely on programmatic simplification.

This new framework, which became particularly visible after the journey to Italy, coincided with a turning point in the HE-structure which, however, did not give rise to an impasse: Nuno Teotónio Pereira relinquished his role of specialist, becoming a consultant — a position he held until the body was closed in 1972. His place was taken by the attentive and energetic João Braula Reis in the leadership of the technical services.

6. CONCLUSION

Acknowledging the two architect's interest in the architecture that was produced in Italy post-World War II period, this article revisits a journey in times of change. It seeks to identify a new path to the design of the house, assuming the modern ideology reconciled with history and tradition. The journey truly constituted one more enriching experience not only for HE as a body but also for the architecture produced through HE.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

- 1 Alberto AC, "Um problema", *A Arquitectura Portuguesa*, Issue No. 125, 1945, 6.
- 2 Law 2007 of 7 May 1945.
- 3 Decree-Law 35611 of 25 April 1946.
- 4 Maria Tavares, "Leituras de um percurso na habitação em Portugal. As Habitações Económicas — Federação de Caixas de Previdência", *Habitação para o maior número. Portugal, os anos de 1950–1980*, Lisbon, IHRU and CML, 2013, 21.
- 5 Maria Tavares, *Habitações Económicas — Federação de Caixas de Previdência, Arquitectura e Modos de Actuação no Exercício do Projeto*, Porto, PhD Thesis presented to Faculty of Architecture, University of Porto [FAUP], 2016.
- 6 Nuno Teotónio Pereira, "Informação LXIX/58 aos Serviços Técnicos das HE", Lisbon, Nuno Teotónio Pereira Documental Archive on Housing and Urbanism, LNEC,

- 1958.
- 7 Nuno Portas in 1957 joined the first studio in Lisbon's Rua da Alegria, which he shared with Nuno Teotónio Pereira, Raul Chorão Ramalho and Manuel Tainha; later, he joined the second studio, where Bartolomeu da Costa Cabral and Nuno Teotónio Pereira accepted him as a collaborator and, later on, an associate.
 - 8 Maria Tavares, "O CODA de Nuno Portas e as Caixas de Previdência", *Nuno Portas 18 Obras Partilhadas*, Porto, Circo de Ideias, 2019, 50.
 - 9 José António Bandeirinha, *O Processo SAAL e a arquitectura no 25 de Abril de 1974*, Coimbra, Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2007, 55.
 - 10 Ibidem.
 - 11 Rosalia Vittori, "La casa popolare dela ricostruzione", *Casa Pubblica e Città, Esperienze europee, ricerche e sperimentazioni progettuali*, Parma, MUP, 2009, 146.
 - 12 José António Bandeirinha, *O Processo SAAL e a arquitectura no 25 de Abril de 1974*, Coimbra, Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2007, 55.
 - 13 For every housing complex that housed 1,000 to 2,000 people, the programme had to take into consideration: a church, nursery and primary school, shops, handicrafts workshop, police station, social services office, meeting room, games fields, children's playpark and respective garages for resident vehicles. Facilities for above that scale could also be provided for: such as a parochial centre, market, medical centre and cinema, thus establishing a dynamic based on acknowledgement of the fact that housing problems were not limited merely to the domestic space.
 - 14 Names such as Ludovico Quaroni, Mario Ridolfi, Carlo Aymonimo, Carlo Chiarini, Maurizio Lanza, Franco Albini, Gianni Albricci, BBPR, Ignazio Gardella, & Luigi Castiglioni, to name just a few, were members of the design teams.

