

LIFE VERSUS ARCHITECTURE.

Rationalist ideals facing popular taste, from Pessac to Malagueira.

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Abstract

The clash between the aesthetics produced by rationalist ideals of the modern movement and the taste of the dwellers is always present, in urban extensions designed in the XX century.

In plans based on single-family housing, this clash led to interesting phenomena of physical transformation of the proposals of the architect, creating hybrid constructions in which it is difficult to recognise the original design.

The "Quartiers Modernes Frugès" (1924-27), design by Corbusier in Pessac (near Bordeaux, in France), is a famous case study of this phenomenon. Commissioned by the French industrial entrepreneur Henry Frugès, it began as a very ambitious plan that aimed to build one hundred and thirty-five houses disposed around a commercial square, but was not completed according to the original plan. Furthermore, some of the houses were altered by the dwellers in a way that was completely unexpected to Corbusier, which commented on the fact with the famous ironic statement: 'It is life that is always right and the architect who's wrong.'

In Portuguese architecture, mainly in the SAAL Program, we can find interesting examples of this confrontation between life and architecture. However, between the experience of the interventions in Porto and the later construction of the urban extension in Malagueira, designed by Álvaro Siza nearby Évora, we can find a very important change: in the second case, the posture of the architect is different, aiming to work with the uncertainty of the final image of the dwellings and leaving to the future owner the possibility to adapt it to his own taste. This different posture makes a great difference in the final results of the intervention as a whole, allowing it to become diversified and alive.

Keywords: Pessac. SAAL. Malagueira. Participation. Uncertainty.

1. Pessac: Life is always right...

The “Quartiers Modernes Frugès” (1924-27) was commissioned to Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret by Henry Frugès, a Bordeaux industrialist.¹ It was in 1921 that the client and the architects first made contact (Ferrand, 1998, p. 63); two years later, fascinated by his discourse on standardization presented in “Vers une architecture”, Frugès commissioned the Swiss architect a small housing estate in Lège and a little house (‘Maison du Tonkin’) in Bordeaux, where Corbusier ‘*first tried out his Dom-ino System*’ (Frampton, 2001, p. 22).

In 1924, the Tonkin house was completed and the Lège construction was in progress, but the problems that would mark its construction had not yet appeared;² encouraged by the apparent success of these first experiments, Frugès presented Corbusier with an irresistible invitation: ‘*I am going to enable you to put your theories fully into practice (...) to reach really conclusive results as regards the reform of low-cost housing*’; more than a housing project, ‘*Pessac should be a laboratory*’, breaking ‘*all conventions*’ and abandoning ‘*all traditional methods*’ (Ferrand, 1998, p. 120).

In contrast to the Lège experience, Pessac was an ambitious enterprise: the initial plan aimed to build one hundred and thirty-five houses and a commercial square, in a site of 38,882 m² purchased by Frugès in the outskirts of Bordeaux, eight kilometers away from the city (Ferrand, 1998, p. 76). For Corbusier, this was the first opportunity to apply his ideas, both on urban planning and on low cost housing. He designed his first ‘*cit  jardin horizontale*’ (Frampton, 2001, p. 22), experimenting with his ideas on standardized construction, with the aim of providing affordable houses for the working class: the houses were destined to the workers of Frugès industries and should provide ‘*domestic and social hygiene (...), air, light and water (...) trees and gardens (...) and hence become the catalyst for happiness and pleasure*’ (Ferrand, 1998, p. 72-3).

¹ Henry Frug s was not a common industrialist, he was also a man of culture; he described himself as a ‘*researcher, polyvalent artist, architect*’ (without a diploma), ‘*painter, sculptor, pianist and composer, writer, art critic, historian, etc.*’ (Ferrand, 1998, p. 64).

² In January 1925, ‘*the southern foundations of the canteen collapsed*’ marking the beginning of various structural problems caused by ‘*the incompetence of Monsieur Poncet*’, the first foreman of the construction, both in Lège and Pessac (Ferrand, 1998, p. 60).

Corbusier managed to build four types of dwellings (*Isolée, Quinconce, Arcade* and *Gratte-Ciel*), conceived as different associations of the same pre-fabricated elements, composed in a five-meter grid. The layout of the buildings was studied to achieve a collective quality in the site: *'External spaces are fused into one whole (...) minimising physical boundaries between the gardens'* (Ferrand, 1998, p. 86).

But the initial good intentions were challenged by reality. The construction process previewed the use of advanced technologies that presented several problems to the first constructor, Mr. Poncet: *'the concrete spray gun was hard to use'* and the pre-fabricated windows *'did not always fit the voids left in the structure'* (Curtis, 1986, p. 66). Even after the hiring of a new foreman, Mr. Summer, who was constructing the *'Pavillon de L'Esprit Nouveau'* in Paris (Ferrand, 1998, p. 108), the difficulties did not stop: *'neither architects nor engineers had proper provision for drainage and this cost Frugès more money and headaches'* (Curtis, 1986, p. 66).

Due to all these construction problems and various administrative complications, the construction lasted longer and cost much more than planned. It was only with the intervention of Anatole de Monzie (the new Minister for Public Works)³ that the bureaucratic problems presented by the prefecture were surpassed (Gans, 1987, p. 108). Pessac was officially inaugurated in 1926 (June 13), but from the one hundred and thirty-five houses planned only fifty five were completed (two of which were destroyed during the Second World War), in the sectors C and D. Sectors A and B, where a commercial square (and the other dwellings) should be, were never initiated (Ferrand, 1998, p. 108-10).

Meanwhile, the cost of the houses increased substantially and it became difficult to sell them; the first dwellings that were *'purchased in 1929-30 were already in a deteriorated state'*. In 1929, Henry Frugès went bankrupt and emigrated to Algeria, leaving the sales under the coordination of Vrinat (an engineer from

³ Corbusier was introduced to Anatole de Monzie (Minister for Public Works since 29 octobre 1925) by Gertrude Stein; two years later, this acquaintance would allow the Swiss architect the commission of villa Stein, by Gabrielle de Monzie (the first wife of Anatole), Michael Stein (brother of Gertude) and his wife, Sarah, painter and art collector (Gans, 1987, p. 62).

Frugés factories); thus, *'the plots of land were sold off slowly, one by one, without a coherent development plan'* (Ferrand, 1998, p. 110).



Figure 1. *'Quartiers Modernes Frugés', Pessac, Corbusier, (1924-27). Image of two 'type Quinconce' houses: the one on the left was recently recovered according to the initial project; the one on the right still presents dwellers alterations (photo by the author, June 2007).*

But as soon as the first dwellers began to inhabit the houses, they began to transform the purist architecture of Pessac *'in all sorts of individual ways, walling up ribbon windows, filling out terraces, dividing up the open-plan rooms, and so on'* (Jencks, 2000, P. 144).

On June 1931, Corbusier writes an alarmed letter to Vrinat, expressing his indignation on the way Pessac *'has been allowed to go to the dogs in such a disgracefully insane way'*. Corbusier complains specifically about the state of house n.º 14 (*'It now resembles some gaudy piece of architecture, the likes of which are found in pseudo-modern spa towns'*) and refers that he *'simply cannot*

comprehend how you [Vrinat] can have allowed the arcades to be filled in and staggered houses to be painted with glycine' (Ferrand, 1998, p. 112).⁴



Figure 2. Closer view on the dwellers' alterations on the 'type *Quinconce*' house shown in figure 1 (photo by the author, June 2007).

Later, in the end of his life, Corbusier recalls the Pessac experience with the expression '*you know, it's life that's always right and the architect who's wrong*', that can be both interpreted as an ironic response to failure (Jencks, 2000, p. 144) or as a disguised commendation, implying '*that the houses had proven their ability to adapt over the long term*' (Ferrand, 1998, p. 118).

Either way, Pessac became a case study of the difficulties of acceptance of the purist aesthetics of the modern movement by the uneducated taste of the dwellers (Boudon, 1985). Corbusier was self-conscious (partially, at least) of the problem when he decided, during the construction, to finish the buildings with a polychromatic composition: '*The Pessac site is very enclosed. The grey concrete*

⁴ Today, thanks to the careful restoration work carried out in Pessac, it is possible to see almost all of the houses in their original image. But the evolution of this neighbourhood is well documented in several studies (see, for example, Boudon, 1969).

houses gave rise to an unbearable compress mass, lacking in air. Colour was the solution' (Ferrand, 1998, p. 129-30). But, of course, colour was not the (only) problem; neither in Pessac, nor in many other examples of housing programs designed in the first half of the XX century, in which the clash between the aesthetics produced by rationalist ideals and the taste of the dwellers is quite obvious, sometimes in a dramatic way.

2. The SAAL Program: *the right to architecture*.

In the sixties and seventies, urban and architectural theories began to address the question of cultural and anthropological relativism and to deal with the issue of the participation of future dwellers in design decisions in housing projects. Authors from various related fields, like Aldo van Eyck, Lévi-Strauss, Bernard Rudofsky, Henry Lefebvre, Josep Coderch, John Turner, Christopher Alexander, John Habraken and Giancarlo De Carlo (among many others...) addressed this issue, with theoretical and/or practical work (Montaner, 2001).

It was in this cultural climate that, in 1974, the revolution of Abril 25 occurred in Portugal and the fascist regime that subsisted for the last 48 years was finally deposed. The consequent political changes allowed the beginning of the SAAL Program,⁵ an ambitious program for the construction of social housing, promoted by the new government all over Portugal between 1974 and 1976.

Portuguese architects faced a paradoxical situation, given the urgency and scale of the needs of local populations and the will to apply two basic principles: the *right to the city* and *the right to architecture* (Bandeirinha, 2007). This attitude implied essential issues of scale, manifested in the relations of the different interventions with the urban environment and in the idea of participation of the future dwellers.

⁵ SAAL, '*Serviço Ambulatório de Apoio Local*' (Ambulatory Local Support Service), was a national housing program created by Nuno Portas, Secretary of State of Housing and Urban Development, in June 1974.

The constructed results of the work of SAAL in Porto⁶ constituted a small part of the initial ambitions: of the thirty-three operations that were initiated, twenty-three were not built (although, in most cases, the design process was completed) and in most of the remaining ten cases the construction was only partial. This relative failure (in view of the original intentions) can be partially related to the delays caused by the participation process: all the operations that were already in construction in 1976 (when the SAAL Program ceased to have the support of the central government)⁷ were finished, at least partially (Fernandes, 2011, 488).

The belief in the *right to architecture* implied an inclusive ideal of participation, in which *'the work of the architect could be classified as «secondary»'*, due to the collaboration effort of the local population in the design process. But this intention was challenged both by the lack of references of the future inhabitants and by the difficulty of the designers to free themselves from their traditional communication methods. So, since the early stages of the projects, most of the architects began to complain about the lack of popular response, while the populations assumed their inability to criticize their work: *'I look at the model, analyze it and all I can think is that I would like to live in a house like that'*. (Bandeirinha, 2007, p. 167-9).

Confronted with this situation, the SAAL teams needed a pragmatic approach to enable an effective response in the short term; Porto architects would seek to create an informal (yet operational) organization, creating synergies between the various technical teams. The SAAL Process provided a laboratory field, where the need for rationality and economy fully justifies an attitude and language with modernist roots. So, most of the resulting housing schemes showed an uniform approach (which resulted of the need to respond to similar circumstances), with a set of common characteristics: organization in parallel volumes, often unrelated to the alignments of the pre-existing city, with long and narrow duplex dwellings

⁶ With the exception of Massarelos and Bouça, all the interventions of SAAL in Porto are low density housing, either built in the consolidated city (Antas, Leal, S. Victor, Lapa) or on its borders, in suburban areas (Chaves de Oliveira, Contumil, Francos, Maceda).

⁷ In October 28, the responsibilities on SAAL coordination were handed over to the municipal authorities, causing the extinction of the program in Porto.

(with around four meter's width, in most cases), a set of stairs in the centre and small openings on both the opposing façades (Fernandes, 2011, p. 477-81).

Yet, although they all share similarities, we can easily distinguish two different approaches in the eight low density housing projects constructed in Porto: in S. Victor (Álvaro Siza), Francos (Rolando Torgo), Lapa (Matos Ferreira e Beatriz Madureira) and Maceda (Alcino Soutinho) we can find a purist language and a rigid volumetry; on the contrary, Contumil (Célio Costa), Antas (Pedro Ramalho), Leal (Sergio Fernandez) and Chaves de Oliveira (Manuel Leça) share an hybrid language, where the typological and formal solutions are best suited to their specific urban environment and more agreeable to the taste of the populations.



Figure 3. SAAL Porto, dwellers' alterations in Maceda housing (Alcino Soutinho, 1975-76): addition of new volume (occupying areas intended for external private spaces) and changes in the colour and material on the exterior walls, which were initially painted in white (photo by the author, Jan. 2006).

The consequences are quite clear: while the hybrid solutions present themselves today with an image that does not differ much from the original construction (since they are less altered and because they assimilate the changes better), the situation of the purist cases is quite different, as the changes made by the dwellers strongly collide with the original intentions of the architects.

Maceda is a good case study of this phenomenon. The construction began as early as 1975, because *'the dwellers made practically no criticism to the organization of the houses'* (Bandeirinha, 2007, p. 167); but soon after the populations began to inhabit the dwellings, they started to introduce all sorts of changes, both in the interior and outside. Today, it is impossible to recognize the original traces of Alcino Soutinho design behind the great variety of volumetric extensions, walls lined with colorful tiles, new windows and altered doors...

In his experience in S. Victor, Álvaro Siza proposed a third way to the dilemma that the SAAL Program presented (the choice between the will to *learn from the people* and the necessity to *teach the people*); trying to avoid adopting any of these positions, which he considered simplistic, he proposed to direct all efforts towards the main objective: to resettle the populations where they live, sharing with them the will to create a physical world to serve a classless society (Siza, 1976, p. 14), but bearing in mind that it is *'unacceptable to dismiss the role of the architect, since collectivity was no substitute for specific and indispensable skills'* (Siza, 2000, p. 160).

3. Malagueira: *the idea is on the site.*

The lessons of the SAAL Program will be reflected in the Malagueira Residential District, initiated in 1977, in which a different attitude was justified by a distinct regional context, a different relation to the city and a greater territorial scope.

Malagueira was designed to dwell 1200 families⁸ nearby Évora, in Alentejo, a *'region in southern Portugal, sparsely inhabited and characterized by large estates'* where *'local production progressed at a very slow pace, depending on manual*

⁸ It begins as part of the SAAL and, after 1976, becomes a cooperative housing program supported by the local administration of Évora.

techniques and materials', circumstances that explain 'the excellent state of conservation' of the city and of the landscape of the region (Siza, 2000, p. 162). The site was in the west expansion area of Évora, just outside the medieval walls (XIV century); it was a rural area previously occupied by farms (Malagueira, Malagueirinha and Sarrabulho) and illegal housing neighborhoods (Santa Maria and Senhora da Glória).

Siza's approach, like always, was based on a critical evaluation of all the components of the program and of the physical and cultural context of the site. His famous motto, '*a ideia está no sítio*' ('the idea is in the site', a notion that practically became a definition of his method and work), was first published in the text '*Notas sobre o trabalho em Évora*' ('Notes on the work in Évora'), written about this experience in Malagueira (Siza, 1979). There, he explained the intended relations with the existing site and the historic city, building a low rise expansion (with one or two story houses, instead of the towers foreseen by the early existing plan from the DGSU)⁹ that allows the city's silhouette to remain unaltered. He also organized the majority of the new dwellings along an east-west axis that prolonged an important preexisting street, Salesianos street,¹⁰ while taking in account other elements that also structure the preexisting territory¹¹ (Siza, 1979, p. 36-8). Furthermore, the design of the houses was conceived to provide a set of formal and typological variations around the traditional concept of patio-house, typical of the south of Portugal (due to its dry and warm climate and to several centuries of Islamic influence).

The scheme was very simple, based on the repetition of an identical parcel (12 x 8 meters), side by side and back to back, allowing most of the houses to share three walls with their neighbors (on both sides and on the back), for economic reasons. Siza proposed a great variety of solutions, resulting in thirty-five variations of a small number of different typologies (which can also evolve in time,

⁹ DGSU: 'Direção-Geral da Sistematização Urbanística' (General Directorate of Urban Systematization).

¹⁰ Salesianos street leads to one of the main doors of the medieval wall, '*Porta d'Alconchel*', and from there to the center of Évora, through Serpa Pinto street.

¹¹ Siza considered the existence of the above-mentioned farms and illegal housing neighborhoods, but also the course of a small stream, the existing vegetation, the ruins of two windmills and the paths traced in the rural soil by the spontaneous use of the local populations (Siza, 1998, p. 113).

from T1 to T5); this permitted a perfect relationship between uniformity and variety, history and present, architectural design and popular participation (Duarte, 2007).

The plan included a minimum of regulations, assuring some principles of uniformity in the whole, establishing the maximum volume of construction, the extent of the patios, the dimensions for fenestration and the height of the walls, but the multiple combinations of the various typologies (and their evolutionary possibilities) resulted in an apparently random variation of shape and rhythm, typical of the traditional Mediterranean tectonic culture.



Figure 4. Secondary street in Malagueira, showing the vegetation emerging from the patios and the rhythm created by the colour strips painted around the windows and doors, in the traditional way of Alentejo (photo by the author, Aug. 2008).

Malagueira was initially criticized by its purist design, which seemingly resulted in a soulless urban space (the people in Évora called it '*the pigsty*'). It was also

considered incomplete and Siza was criticized for not being able to create a finished image for the intervention (Siza, 1998). Today, it is evident that these considerations were premature.

The one thing we can be sure about Siza's plan in Évora is that it does not suffer from the *'eagerness to finish everything quickly'*; on the contrary, *'the initial premises for the design lay in attempting to delimit the territory with a series of interventions, leaving time and various initiatives to accomplish the task of completing the project, occupying the vacant spaces'* (Siza, 2000, p. 160).



Figure 5. Secondary street in the historic centre of Évora, (photo by the author, Aug. 2008).

Malagueira's detractors decreased, with the passage of time, as it was becoming increasingly obvious that it was planned to evolve in the long term. One of the signs that certifies that this evolution is occurring in the right direction is the way the neighborhood accommodates the transformations that the dwellers introduce in the houses. Today, we can find painted color strips around the windows and doors (in the traditional way of Alentejo), trees and flowers in the patios (creating

colorful spots of vegetation that emerge to the streets) and even some unplanned decorative elements (of dubious taste). Neither of this contributes to disqualify the global image; on the contrary, all this modifications offer this urban space a spontaneous component of popular taste that contributes to bring life to the whole.

When we visit Malagueira today, the rigid uniformity that caused the initial criticisms is no longer obvious. To an uninformed eye, it can appear that there was no architect involved in the genesis of this urban space; the personality of Siza, so strong in other works, is not easily recognizable (Moneo, 2004, p. 204). However, we should bear in mind that this is the result of the specific approach that Siza chose to this project; it is not the consequence of an unforeseen lucky chance, but the natural outcome of the conditions created by the architect and of the flexibility left in the plan, so that it could evolve with time, with the foreseen '*collaboration*' of the people '*by whom and for whom*' it was constructed (Távora, 1953).

The difference between the enlightened solution of Pessac, the attempted participation of some of the SAAL projects and the work of Siza in Évora is that, in this last case, time was an instrument of design: the plan was not a closed reality, neither were the participation processes. This is the main lesson of Malagueira: to create the conditions for the natural growth of an urban space, without trying to design every aspect of its evolution. To allow time to have an important part in the process of consolidation of its character.

Siza's quoted phrase '*the idea is in the site*' can be completely understood in the context of this work. The *site* is not limited to its physical area: it also encloses the immediate surroundings and a wide-ranging selection of aspects related to the region and its people, its history, its present culture and its foreseen future.

It is curious to notice that in 1979 (when Siza wrote the text where he first expressed the abovementioned idea), two essential books on architecture's phenomenology that emphasized this notion were also published: *Genius Loci*, by Norberg-Schultz, and *The Timeless Way of Building*, by Christopher Alexander.

We can find a particular proximity to our subject on the contents of the later:

There is a central quality which is the root criterion of life and spirit in a man, a town, a building, or a wilderness. This quality is objective and precise, but it cannot be named (...) when a building has this fire, then it becomes a part of nature (...) its parts are governed by the endless play of repetition and variety created in the presence of the fact that all things pass.

(...) This quality in buildings and in towns cannot be made, but only generated, indirectly, by the ordinary actions of the people, just as a flower cannot be made, but only generated from the seed. (Alexander, 1979, p. ix-xi).

This notion can be applied to Siza's work in Évora: he planted the seeds, '*specified the DNA*', allowing the ensemble to '*assume different forms in response to different local needs and circumstances*' (Mitchell, 2007).

Today, in Malagueira, it is not yet possible to see (or even foresee) the final results of this process. But it is possible to feel the birth of this *quality without a name*.

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