

**THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY IN ARCHITECTURE TOWARDS
GLOBALIZATION: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE HOUSE IN MOLEDO BY
EDUARDO SOUTO MOURA**

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ABSTRACT

Globalization creates cultural comes-and-goes around the world, promoting transitory, ephemeral and floating identities that we may call “hybrid identities”, which become the major characteristic of our contemporary world. So how do we deal with the huge pressure of worldwide architectural context whilst preserving our own character? What can we do to claim the diversity of architectural culture and the maintenance of local traditions? What methodological tools are available to avoid the alienation of nowadays’ architects from their traditions for the sake of genuine architecture?

By analyzing the House in Moledo we’ll reflect on the identity of Portuguese traditional architecture and the way Souto Moura faces this topic. The houses he designs are the result of a long and arduous process of analysis, refinement and decision. It can be interpreted as a set of variations on a theme, like Mies van der Rohe did, resulting in a simplicity that isn’t easy to achieve. By observing the evolution of his research, it seems obvious that it comes down to a kind of pattern that reveals a specific typology. But what does it have to do with local architecture?

In this house, six tons of stone were used in blind side walls, erected with irregular blocks of granite anchored in dry, supporting the place’s high demanding along a vast expanse of a steep hillside overlooking the Atlantic coastline through its terraced agricultural banks. By sustaining an outcropping of rock in the back of the house as an extra visual reaffirming, plus the link between the environment and the interior of the house, he praises the masonry work as the main value of its architecture. But is this enough to define it as Portuguese architecture?

Through this experience, which achieved a harmonic architectural balance and its worldwide recognition as a farsighted case-study, we intend to reflect on the direct effects globalization induces on the local cultural identity, and the challenges we’re facing.

Keywords: Architectural Practice; Values; Criticism; Identity; Globalization

INTRODUCTION

In 1961, Paul Ricouer (in *History and Truth*) wrote a kind of manifesto where his concerns are evident on the phenomenon of globalization as an advancement of mankind, as well as a sort of subtle destruction, once it was putting the diversity of its traditional cultures at risk, i.e., the bases of which life is interpreted. In fact, Ricouer

identified a paradox: it was vital to become modern, but it was crucial to return to traditional sources, at the same time.

About twenty years later, Kenneth Frampton writes an influential essay on Modern Architecture, with the title “*Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance*” (1983), sharing these same worries and quoting Paul Ricouer in its *opening*. Frampton refreshes the awareness that architecture should resist the homogeneity inherent in modern society, but rejects the fatal consideration of a paradox. Instead he admits the existence of an architecture that can incorporate both positions. In fact, by exploring issues like *difference* and *identity*, calling for a *place-conscious poetic*, Frampton seeks to evoke a reinvigorated regional architecture sustained in a geographic and cultural structure. But what is it really relevant to retain, in this manifesto, for the sake of the contemporary architecture?

Now, thirty years later, these same concerns are still in question. Hence in this paper we intend to reflect about how to deal with the huge pressure of worldwide architectural context, but preserving its own character? What can we do to claim the diversity of architectural culture and the maintenance of local traditions?

Through the analysis of the *House in Moledo* we aim to identify the way Eduardo Souto Moura embraces the Portuguese traditional architecture, as well as a universal language, achieving a harmonic architectural balance. In sum, we intend to reflect about the direct effects that globalization induces on local cultural identity, in search for a methodological tool to avoid the alienation of nowadays’ architects from their traditions, aiming for genuine architecture.

1. Framing: Globalization vs Critical Regionalism

If Globalization is a process of interaction and integration among people around the world, driven by international trade and investment (with free transfer of capital, goods, ideas and services across national frontiers), it has effects on the environment and the culture of the Nations. Inevitably it implies the opening of local and nationalistic perspectives to a broader outlook, entailing a new setting of “distance” and “time”. In *The Consequences of Modernity*, Anthony Giddens uses the following definition: “*Globalization can thus be defined as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.*”[1]

Although the word "globalization" is a very recent term, once that its current meaning wasn't established until the 1970s, the large-scale globalization really began in the late 19th century to early 20th century. The consciousness of the world as a whole, where people could travel through frontiers, sharing the best of each country, led to Modernity. Furthermore, globalization was the vehicle to spread the *Modern Movement*, which dictated the main architecture of the last century.

However, it grew enormously in the 21th century with the help of the rise of *Media* technologies, like the Internet and mobile phones, generating further interdependence of economic and cultural activities. Actually it has been the major factor in globalization,

promoting transitory, ephemeral and floating identities that we may call a *hybrid identity*, which becomes the main characteristic of our contemporary world, in many ways.

Indeed, cultural globalization is notably marked by the transmission of ideas, meanings and values around the world, increasing some cross-cultural significant contacts. But it also may be leading to a decrease in the uniqueness of once-isolated communities, contributing to the alienation of individuals, as well as it can become a threat to the diversity of local culture.

Concerning architecture, we may say that it is unavoidably tagged by a universal language, sustained by an exchange of construction's technologies and materials, sharing the same systems, models, images and even values, wherever it is built. The contributions of the main local architectural traditions are now mostly irrelevant and it also ignores the place, the site, its *genius loci*, or even the geographic idiosyncrasies' and the contingencies of climate. It looks like the most important thing is to achieve a *nowadays' international style*, though it's now different from the one praised by Philip Johnson and Hitchcock [2] back in the 1930's, which were related to the *Modern Movement*.

Kenneth Frampton wrote, already in 1983: "*Modern building is now so universally conditioned by optimized technology that the possibility of creating significant urban form has become extremely limited. (...) The practice of architecture seems to be increasingly polarized between, on the one hand, a so-called "high-tech" approach predicated exclusively upon production and, on the other, the provision of a "compensatory façade" to cover up the harsh realities of the universal system.*" [3]

In fact this quotation still remains absolutely current, which may lead us to the conclusion that, during these last three decades, less was done to avoid or contradict this *universal system*. Thus, we wonder: are nowadays' architects struggling for authenticity in their architecture as well as trying to preserve local architectural traditions? Are they really worried about issues like *heritage*, *difference* or *identity*? Or are they comfortable, feeding the mixed up *universal language* of our contemporary architecture?

Regionalism, on the other hand, is the tendency to value some specific interests of a certain geographical region, based on the legitimation of local habits and traditions, as the expression of a particular identity shaped by collective actions and grounded on the environmental conditions within this region. "*During the past few decades, there has been a tremendous surge in regionalism throughout the international system. This growth has been stimulated in large measure by the proliferation of regional institutions, giving rise to substantial scholarly interest in both their sources and consequences.*"[4]

Nevertheless, with regards to Architecture, or furthermore to the architectural practice, Kenneth Frampton brought up a new theoretical concept called *Critical Regionalism*. This rooted yet critical strategy aimed to go beyond the mere criticism of globalization, trying to reveal a conceptual solution for *an Architecture of Resistance*, while avoiding

the risk of lapsing into a conservative policy as the *Populism*; warning that “*it is necessary, as I have already suggested, to distinguish between Critical Regionalism and simple-minded attempts to revive the hypothetical forms of a lost vernacular.*” [5]

For Frampton, in a way, modern architecture was losing qualities through a blind implementation of industrialized techniques which work against any reflection of local culture and *tectonic* consideration in built-forms. However, Frampton neither wholly rejected the universal or the industrial new technologies, nor he advocates the return to some kind of *sentimental regionalism*. Instead, he calls for architecture that can embrace new technology, culture and nature, yet appealing to a *place-conscious poetic*, as he named it. Somehow he suggests a critique of regionalism which nonetheless has regions at its centre.

“The fundamental strategy of Critical Regionalism is to mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place. It is clear from the above that Critical Regionalism depends upon maintaining a high level of critical self-consciousness. It may find its governing inspiration in such things as the range and quality of the local light, or in a ‘tectonic’ derived from a peculiar structural mode, or in the topography of a given site.” [6]

Towards the consolidation of an *Architecture of Resistance* which includes the considerations of topography, context, climate, light and tectonic-form, Frampton clarified: “*Critical Regionalism necessarily involves a more directly dialectical relation with nature than the more abstract, formal traditions of modern avant-garde architecture allow. It is self-evident that the ‘tabula rasa’ tendency of modernization favors the optimum use of earth-moving equipment inasmuch as a totally flat datum is regarded as the most economic matrix upon which to predicate the rationalization of construction. Here again, one touches in concrete terms this fundamental opposition between universal civilization and autochthonous culture. The bulldozing of an irregular topography into a flat site is clearly a technocratic gesture which aspires to a condition of absolute ‘placelessness’, whereas the terracing of the same site to receive the stepped form of a building is an engagement in the act of ‘cultivating’ the site.*” [7]

In sum, Kenneth Frampton did believe that this problem could be overcome through the use of local materials and traditional building techniques that also involve the contemplation of local context and climate. Consequently, it will imply the *heritage* of the most relevant technical traditions, embodying its local *identity* and inducing the *difference* which contributes to the consolidation of genuine architecture around the world.

2. The case study: *House in Moledo* by Eduardo Souto Moura

Eduardo Souto Moura is one of the faces of the so-called *Oporto School* which heads the Contemporary Portuguese Architecture. In his educational background it is easy to recognize the importance given to the heritage of values and tools, pursuing some kind of *continuity*, while chasing its updating through the reinterpretation of *tradition*. Nevertheless, at same time, this architect claims the influence of *Modern Movement* (in

particular, of Mies van der Rohe) in his early works. Somehow, we may say that Souto Moura evokes the reinvention of *tradition* whilst finding his own architectural language.

In his principles, Souto Moura assumes the importance given to the place, gauging the answers and opportunities of the traditional materials of the region. His architectural main solutions are related to the site, to the profound knowledge of the place, implying the absolute assimilation of the spot, where the *dialog* between the building and the landscape is crucial.

The houses he designs are the result of a long and arduous process of analysis, refinement and decision. It can be interpreted as a set of variations on a theme (like Mies van der Rohe did) resulting in a simplicity that isn't easy to achieve. By observing the evolution of his research, it seems obvious that it comes down to a kind of pattern that reveals a specific typology. They are all interrelated to a pragmatic functional logic (segregating *social* from *private* areas), aiming the debugging of a *generic form*, but never neglecting the use of the precise construction materials, and its accurate technical applications, regarding the genuine traditions of the region.



Fig.1_ House in Moledo. Photo by: © Luis Ferreira Alves

The *House in Moledo* (1991-98) was designed and built at the same time as the *House in Baião* (1990-93), being the similarities between the two easily identified. They are a simple “*box*” framed in a single floor with a flat roof, which confines a rectangular plan, structured by a long glass front facade that embraces the optimization of the sun light and the magnificence of the view. In spite of the fact that the *House in Baião* has been essentially supported by an old ruin and inserted into the earth, fitting itself perfectly in the continuity of the existing granite stone wall, where the front glass facade was “opened” towards the river Douro, i.e., towards that peculiar landscape of the North of Portugal; And the fact that the House in Moledo has been built on a formerly farmland, raised in a vast steep hillside over its terraced agricultural banks, allowing a glimpse at the magnetic view above the Atlantic Ocean, in Moledo do Minho, somewhere in the North of Portugal; One would have to admit that the essence of the design of this two weekend-houses is quite the same.

On the *House in Moledo*, six tons of stone were used in blind side walls, erected with irregular blocks of granite anchored in dry, supporting the high requirements of the place. This way he *works* the land using the traditional technique of the region, whereby that landscape has been shaped, marked by long-lasting human achievements. The

house fits along the granite walls, assisted by the provision of reinforced concrete walls, yet coated in stone. Between two blind walls, in the front, lies a large sliding glass that covers a kitchen, a living room, three bedrooms, and bathrooms; In the back, a long glass' wall protects a service corridor that runs across the building façade, facing an outcropping of rocks. This way, it gives a shelter feeling, as well as ensuring an extra sight in the back, reaffirming the wished link between the environment and the house.

3. Ascertainment

Actually, in the *House in Moledo*, there is an evident approach to a canonical model of the *Modern Movement*, namely with regards to the built-form (a “box” with flat roof) and the materials used (concrete and long glass panes framed in steel), as well as the simplicity of the functional layout in the interior. Furthermore, in its immaterial transparency, the landscape is keen; therefore, once again, he is inspired by Mies' Farnsworth House, undoubtedly. Nonetheless, he also doesn't dismiss the use of *optimized* and *industrialized technology* to achieve all the comfort that is required nowadays. Besides, the traditional materials are associated with the use of current technological elements, giving it a contemporary character.

On the other hand, Souto Moura's interpretation of that site exceeds the qualification of *a better site*, when the house starts to become part of that environment. Paradoxically, this house emerges among the *building* that is submitted to a *site* and a *site* that submits to a *building*. And maybe this is the only way to accomplish good architecture, i.e., the perfect blend of *a building in a given site*. In fact, the project's genesis matches with the terrain modeling in order to emphasize its natural harmony. In this (re)modeling remained the levels of the land, its irregular topography; and he recycled the existing stones using it in the terraces' walls, which also characterize the nearby landscape.

Working carefully the surrounding of the house, he even recreates a more private ambience seen as, despite its considerable dimensions, it closes up to the public domain, inserting natural elements, which allow its openings without preventing the privacy of the inhabitants. Curiously, from the outside, it is impossible to distinguish this house among the landscape nowadays.



Fig.2_ The surrounding of the house, June 2016. Photo by: the author.

Indeed, this previous interpretation of the place often becomes the reason that sustains the main ideas of this Portuguese architect. However, in his work, the notion isn't directly related to a vernacular architecture. The *vernacular*, in his case, may be the ability to understand the essence of each site, doing the best for it through the addition of *genuine architecture*. This consciousness is always associated with a drawing clarity and simplicity of form, using current materials and techniques that recall the works of their own time. The combination of both factors, the respect for the place and local culture, offer their architecture a timeless charisma, exemplifying perfectly the Kenneth Frampton's concept of *Architecture of Resistance*.

CONCLUSION

"I think there is no architecture without nature (...). Then what is the role of the architect? Must draw the energy of the place, study it to understand what isn't well in that place; to improve it should add something artificial to a totally natural place." [8]

With these words, Souto Moura himself expresses an evident attention in this dialectic between nature and artifice. Perhaps the "*building a site*", the sensitivity towards the site is the proper key. For this, the profound integration with the site and the dialogue with the context where it is placed are essential, concealing *new spaces* with nature, blending borders and articulating all the surrounding elements. Somehow it turns into a methodological tool, a kind of mental and intellectual exercise in itself. And maybe this is the way to deal with the huge pressure of worldwide architectural context, preserving its own character, claiming the diversity of architectural culture and the maintenance of local traditions.

From Kenneth Frampton we retained the need to merge a *place-form* as essential to a critical architectural practice, which should match culture and nature, appealing to a "*place-conscious poetic*" and ensuring "*the act of 'cultivating' the site*", using his own words.

In the *House in Moledo*, Souto Moura praises the *masonry work* as the main value of its architecture. Six tons of irregular blocks of granite were used in blind side walls, which characterize the nearby landscape. So we wonder: Is this enough to be defined as Portuguese Architecture? Well, we cannot assure that this is exactly what Portuguese Architecture is all about, but we may certainly say: the architecture belongs to that place. And that's what really matters, in our point of view.

Above all, we have to admit that this gathering between the influence of Mies van der Rohe and regional inspiration characterizes and distinguishes this house of Eduardo Souto Moura. In fact, in this *reinvention of tradition*, through the reinterpretation of the architectural language, values and procedural tools, while facing local contexts, lays an intelligent response to globalization *modus operandi*.

To sum up, this *paper* reflected on the direct effects that globalization induces in the local cultural identity, in the search for a methodological tool to avoid the alienation of nowadays' architects from their traditions, regarding a historical research towards

theory, gauging the role of architecture in our contemporary society for the sake of *genuine architecture*.

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