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The unfinished business of regionalism and tradition in Portuguese modern architecture
Ricardo Costa Agarez

“To turn the witchcraft against the wizard, which is much more useful than creating one’s own witchcrafts.” This was how Victor Palla, a Lisbon-based architect, described in 1949 his (post-war) generation’s strategy to address concerns with built environment traditions in conservative, dictatorship-led Portugal: tradition’s strength should be acknowledged, and competent designers would “derive from it a means of defence for modern architecture”. Such was the actual importance of tradition.

They were, of course, not alone: so-called vernacular practices had been appreciated by early modernists, and after WWII proponents of what Sarah Williams Goldhagen dubbed “situated modernism” emerged around the globe. Yet in Portugal this strategy was not only architectural but also political, as it carried a sharp critique of the regime’s use of superficial, pseudo-regional features in public and private buildings (remnants of the turn-of-the-century, Deutscher Werkbund-informed *Casa Portuguesa* campaign) for nationalistic purposes. To do modern architecture in Portugal in the 1950s was to be progressive and engage in veiled political resistance: to counter backward conservatism. The problem was, modern architecture itself was then under threat, indeed pronounced “dead” in some quarters. A novel approach to local and regional features and design modes, from site specificities to techniques and materials, while keeping modernist tenets alive, became a viable prospect for Portuguese architects to finally advance their modern practices, free from official constraints. They renounced abstract methods, showed sensibility to their context and engaged with the international turn towards humanism and the realism of everyday lives and needs.

Imbued with references from Brazil, Italy, Holland and Finland, Portuguese architects – who were politically but not culturally isolated – experimented with hybrid combinations of old mechanisms in new design solutions, and new technical possibilities in familiar built forms. Their regionalist modernism (my label) was another form of situatedness, a specific, plain tectonics whose particularities relied on material and texture as much as on design intent. Some of the most successful works of architecture in Portugal date from the 1950s and 1960s and stem from that diverse, excitingly crossbred attitude, where pragmatism instils, rather than hinders, craftsmanship.

Yet the word “regionalism” would not do: designers and critics saw it as too compromised with the pursuit of nationalistic building templates in the 1930s (type X for this region, Y for that, within the rich mosaic of the nation’s “diversity in unity”). This is why, as soon as Anglo-Saxon academia appropriated and extended the historiographic concept of “critical regionalism” in the 1980s, the Portuguese associated those works with the new category, aided by global survey authors (Curtis, Frampton) who clustered designs by Fernando Távora and Álvaro Siza Vieira together with those of Scarpa, Pikionis and Coderch. By affixing the “critical” to “regionalism”, a sense of resistance was ensured and any connotation with a fascist status quo sense of regionalism was avoided. To Portuguese architectural culture, sharply politicised after the 1974 revolution that finally reinstated democracy, critical regionalism offered the right political overtones, internally, and a much welcome conduit for the internationalisation of (some of) the country’s output. Between Portuguese architecture and critical regionalism, a mutually beneficial relationship

developed: the concept found in Portugal yet another instance of materialisation (this time, in a little-known corner of peripheral Europe) and Portuguese architecture found in the concept a useful vehicle for broader recognition.

This development was not without its long-term consequences. The relationship became a little too cosy, to the detriment of architectural diversity. The popularity of critical regionalism can be read, in part, as a backlash against the rise of postmodernism, in that the former offered a critique of abstract, international style modernism that was substantially less brash and polemical than the postmodernist approach. In Portugal, the agenda of architects eager to avert postmodernism drew heavily on the country's critical regionalist heritage – particularly as represented by the School of Porto and personified in Távora and Siza. It also drew, rather counterintuitively, on a new wave of modernism that, under the baton of Eduardo Souto de Moura, justified itself with the need to vindicate what its proponents called the “forbidden Modern Movement” in interbellum Portugal. Post-postmodernist architecture should go back to the teachings of Mies et al, they claimed, and this was acceptable because the dictatorship had crushed modernism's original progress with its backward, template regionalism.

Contemporary Portuguese architecture is trying to move beyond the straitjacket of this self-righteous, sterile, neo-modernist wave, and there are good signs of hope – but the weight of this other, more recent “tradition” is proving hard to lift.

Ricardo Costa Agarez researches the history, theory and culture of architecture and the built environment in Portugal since the 19th century.

[exterior]

Façade of the *pousada* [inn] of Sidroz on Salamonde dam, Vieira do Minho, showing the characteristic trellised wood shutters (*reixas*) drawn from local tradition. Arch. Januário Godinho, 1951-1956. Estúdio Novais, n.d., © Gulbenkian Art Library, CFT003.060001.

[interior]

Lounge area in the same building. Note the use of traditional techniques such as wickerwork in furnishings. Estúdio Novais, n.d., © Gulbenkian Art Library, CFT003.123898.