

Drawing on time and form

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ABSTRACT: The text presents a series of drawings made in the context of a wider research on the formation of urban squares in Portuguese Southern towns in the early modern period. The drawings intent to present themselves as an alternative approach to the conventional plans with the evolution of urban areas. Instead of the usual representation system, a strong emphasis on the graphic features attempts to create a more in-depth approach to analytic and synthetic issues regarding the formation of urban space by encompassing multiple complexities – chronological and morphological – on a single drawing.

Keywords: Urban analysis, Drawing, Graphical analysis, History of cities

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Figure 1. Serpa, Plan ca. 17th century.

Research is usually portrayed as a neutral and objective activity rooted in scientifically defined criteria. It is rooted in the empirical materials and sources, its critical analysis and hermeneutics, and on the debate, or so it says in theory (Col, 1999, p. 5). Therefore, far from what is usually seen as the main impulses of creation. Still, some evidence can be found that science also relies on the same procedures found in the realm of artistic creation. As put by C. Ginzburg and A. Prosperi, the researcher is not going to change his personal view of the world whatever evidences he finds on a subject (Ginzburg, 1975, p. 74), something already heard in the famous statement by Einstein “God does not play dice with the universe.” And at the beginning of the 20th

century, the surrealists-Freud connection showed how science and arts’ procedure have a long-standing liaison.



Figure 2. Serpa, Geometric-morphological conjecture.

With this background, the text presents a graphic and written reflection on the use of drawing as an analytical tool in the context of a historical study on urban space shaping, here understood as formation, generation, and emergence. Therefore,

Therefore, the processes underlying the urban form are mainly at stake, and much less the configuration shapes as a momentary result. The drawings reflect an attempt to explore how the graphical potential of a contemporary drawing could be explored as an analytical device to achieve different insights in the context of a historical study on urban space. This would imply moving away from the more conventional aspects of drawing in the context of architectural and urban representation.

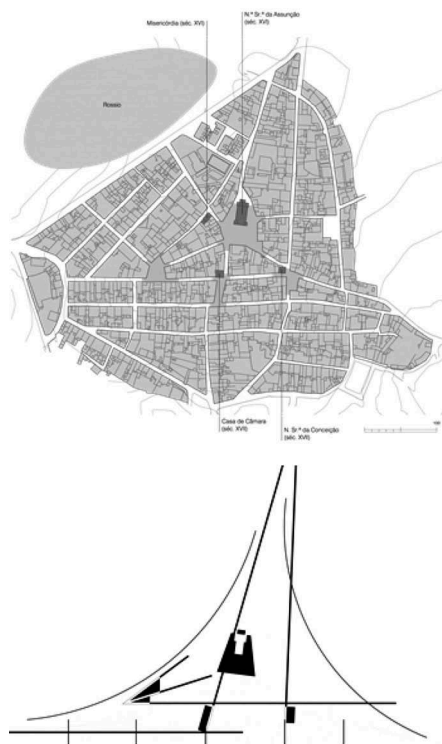


Figure 3. Vila Nova de Baronia.

The intent was not to define a different methodology to study the urban space or a new form of graphical-morphological analysis. Even less to emphasize some kind of “innovation” regarding the use of drawing in the study of past urban forms and spaces. A first glance immediately reveals more than evident similarities with the graphical work of Kandinsky, a long-standing interest, precisely for their analytical capacities. Nevertheless, beyond this immediate analogy, there is another decisive driving force beyond these drawings. The analytical sketches from Paul Klee’s courses at Bauhaus focused mainly on the study not of the form but of the formation, meaning on the underlying and invisible aspects of visible form. In the words of Pierre Boulez, Paul Klee, beyond speaking on forms, colors, and so on, was mainly analyzing how to transmute the forces of nature into lines of a picture (Boulez, 1983). Alternatively, paraphrasing Patrick Geddes – “A city is more than a place in space, it is a drama in time” – how to put this drama in lines of a drawing.

More than a coherent narrative, the following sequence of text and images assumes the form of conjectures, sometimes aphorisms. A paralleled and two-fold statement, where convergences, divergences, and crossings follow each other, concerns

the use of these drawings within a precise context, the formation of urban squares in Southern Portuguese towns at the beginning of the early modern period.

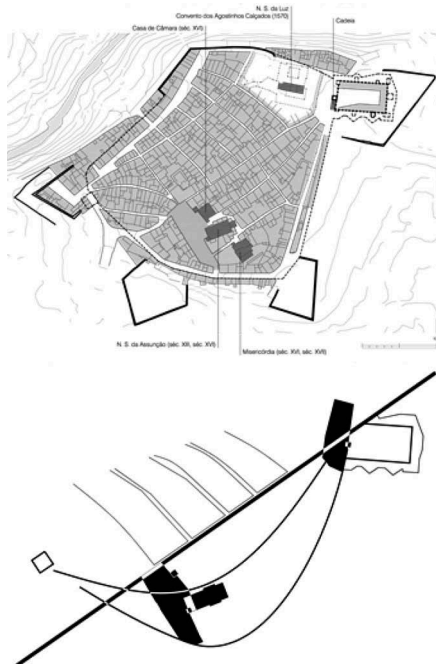


Figure 4. Arronches.

2 ON TIME

All art is a dialogue. So is all interest in the past. [...] In the end, it can be only a dialogue in the present about the present. (Finley, 1968, p. 15)

In 1968, Moses Finley, significantly a historian of Ancient Greece, pointed at the analogy between art and the study of the past. Moreover, he establishes that history, the study of the past, more than anything else, is connected with the present and about the present, which means that history, or more precisely the historian, cannot rely on the illusion that he is in the past, looking at it as if it was there. The questions addressed to the past are always from the present time.

This presence of the present institutes a certain synchronicity in our perception and study of the past. Even when assembled in a diachronic way, it is always an extremely compressed past, the one that we unfold. The historian gathers a bunch of relations from the past, most of them with little

evidence of causality. As acutely pointed by Wittgenstein,

a hypothetical link is not meant to do anything other than draw attention to the similarity, the connection between the facts. Just as one might illustrate an inner relation between a circle and an ellipse by gradually transforming an ellipse into a circle; but not to claim that a given ellipse in fact, historically, emerged from a circle, rather only to sharpen our eye for a formal connection. (Wittgenstein, 1967, p. 47-48)

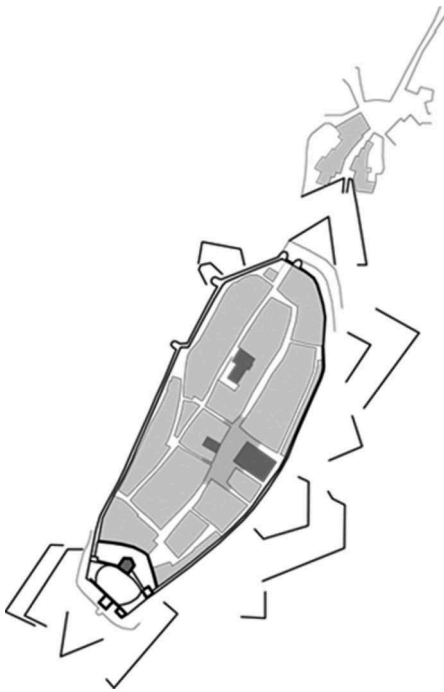


Figure 5. Monsaraz.

Still, one of the most common graphical devices in urban studies is the plans with the evolution of a certain urban area. In these, a series of plans, usually in chronological sequence, presents how an area evolved in a certain period. While allowing unfolding the successive shaping of an urban structure, this approach prevents seeing the relation between events separated in time. It points at isolated events, emphasizing the exceptional single form. While defining more precisely a form in a specific time, it leaves aside former and future transformations.

3 DRAWINGS: THE FORMS

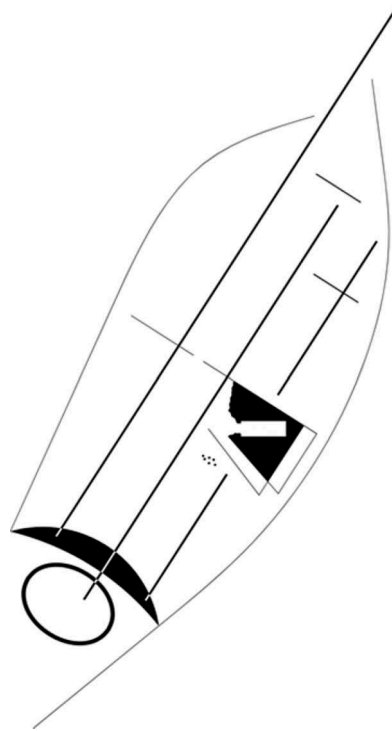


Figure 6. Monsaraz.

With the above-outlined presuppositions, the drawings presented here addressed a set of issues regarding the formation of the urban space. The aim was:

- i) to express in a single drawing the diversity of forms in an explicit graphical way;
- ii) to express in a single drawing the several processes underlying the formation of the urban form;
- iii) to have an explicit drawing in which the different issues were not graphically confused, but instead clearly separated;
- iv) to have in a single drawing both of the analytical and of the synthetic character, clearly separated, yet articulated and coexistent;
- v) in the end, to have a drawing encompassing, as much as possible, all the complexity of the urban process, leaving nothing aside, at least wishfully.

The process of making these drawings was, of course, of a dual nature. On the one hand, they were made experimentally: making, re-making, rehashing, etc. The trial and error that Gombrich (Gombrich, 1970) so clearly explained as characterizing all

artistic procedures. On the other, the elements and processes to be made explicit needed to be known, defined, researched, and proven, which means that the more intuitive aspects needed a permanent confrontation with the rational evaluation. Most of the drawings achieved their final state after a series of 10 to 15 attempts.

While the procedure involved strong graphical thinking, it always relied on hard and painstakingly historical and morphological research and decoding. Those elements are to be expressed as the foreground of the drawings, not as mere support, but as the issues that should immediately emerge from the drawings. Therefore, historical and morphological elements and processes had a first and clear picture before, floated, providing an immediate drawing attempt.

While each drawing had to deal with the specificities of each town, a common set of elements were present and defined, as they had, most of the time, a strong role. Mainly they were the

urban wall, streets layout, plot patterns, territorial roads, singular exceptional buildings, and singular exceptional urban spaces. Those elements were translated into lines, varied according to each town, and to his graphical effectiveness. Overall, each graphic element should be clearly different from the others in size, form, weight, and pattern. For instance, the clear distinction of the urban wall was most of the time achieved by his transformation as a regular geometric form with a thick line. Graphic contrast and emphasis were constantly used in order to achieve a clear distinction between elements.

4 DRAWINGS: THE TIME

Any historical study should deal with the issue of time. Beyond a chronological sequence of events, it also concerns the temporal depth of the phenomena and how they spread in multiple directions. Historical studies usually present themselves as a compact and monolithic narrative emphasizing coherence. However, paraphrasing Céline, everything that is interesting is surely happening in the shadows, we know nothing about the real history of men (Céline, 1970, p. 44). The temporal depth mentioned has less to do with the so-called French *longue durée* and more with all the gaps and fractures of time contained in every historical study.

Seen from a distance, the events seem to have more or less uniformity. When the research starts digging deeper and deeper into the sources – mainly primary ones –, what seemed quite plain issues acquire a more polyhedral aspect, and the coherent narrative becomes more and more inadequate, thus needing a more problematic approach to the multiple “textures of time.”

When a historical study presents itself as let us say, “Portuguese Dominican Convents in the 16th century”, the reader is confronted with a supposedly extensive study on a certain subject within a determined chronological scope. However, what is usually taken as the object is a highly selective set of cases, dealing with an also selective set of sources, thus leaving plenty voids of events and of times. From an epistemological point of view, these inevitable gaps should be exposed, instead of filled with more or less arbitrary relations or with subjective interpretations, however reasonable they may seem. As expressed in the famous quote from Niels Bohr to Einstein, “you are not thinking; you are merely being logical,” or in the words of Maurice Bloch, “This is so logically but of course this does not mean that it is so historically” (Bloch, 1987, p. 296).

Those unfilled gaps and fractures of time are crucial to the temporal depth of any historical study. They are the spaces where future scholars can insert to overcome established narratives.

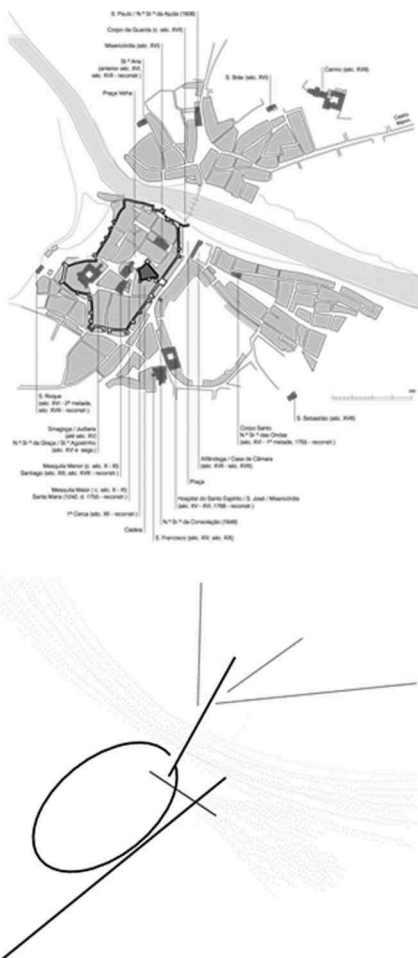


Figure 7. Tavira.

The drawings presented in this paper attempt to deal with this issue graphically. The strong contrasts between the elements are a graphical translation of those voids of time, leaving room for those multiple unknown events and forms present in any town. This graphical approach is not a particular characteristic of these drawings. In musical composition, the sense of voids of space – and of time – is frequently achieved using notes within a distance of one or more octaves. Instead of a D played next to a C, just a tone apart, the D is played an octave higher, therefore having an eight-tonne interval, thus creating a sound impression of space and time between the notes. This compositional device is used both in classical and contemporary music and by some musicians within popular music, namely, in ambient music, where the use of strong reverberations in time need that the musical notes used as sources have a clear separation between them to allow the secondary harmonic notes to spread in that space and time.

That same procedure has been adopted while making these drawings, not only by leaving the white space of the paper but also by creating strong differences between forms and strong the It is within this same procedure therefore within the very nature of time, as inextricably merged with any historical process, that these drawings were made.

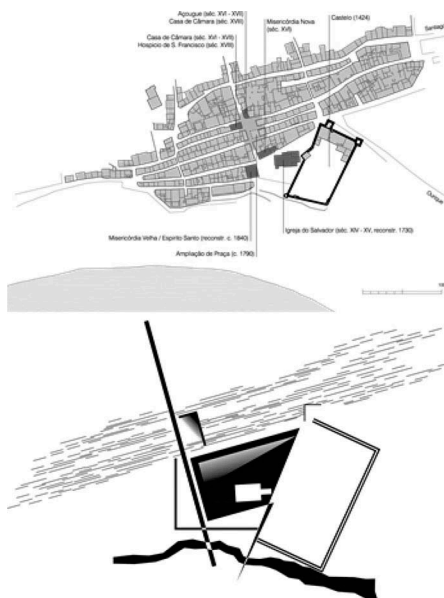


Figure 8. Sines.

5 THE GRAPHICAL SEDUCTION

Needless to say, these drawings were done to be appealing and seductive. At least to the author, hopefully to others as well. With the mentioned analytical and research issues, in the end, these drawings are intended to present themselves as distinct from an aesthetical point of view.

Still, this seductive side intends to have scientific consequences. History, especially art history, will always have the same answers as long as it keeps asking the same questions. In a sense, Vasari's proposal in art studies still echoes in contemporary historiography, listing on one side names of artists, other artistic works, and thereon linking names with works. The drawings in this paper put at a distance the more representational aspects of drawing. This stance envisages epistemological consequences, i.e., it is meant to allow seeing different things and raises new questions, hopefully useful. In a sense, the stance is based on Klee's assertion, drawing does not reproduce the visible, rather it makes visible (1920, p. 15). Therefore, using a non-representational drawing – but still strictly linked with the objects of study – that new things, new questions are expected to be seen.

6 REMARKS ON THE FORM AND DISTANCE

As already stated, all interest in the past, i.e., all historical study, is a dialogue in the present about the present. This implies that a clear relation of distance is implied regarding the past. Whatever the efforts one puts on the study, whatever the sources we dig on the archives, whatever our attempt to write on using an almost accomplice language, the past will always remain, irreducibly, a foreign place. Therefore, most of the questions that we throw at it are alien to those past persons.

This distance, either in time or in place, frequently provokes a sense of strangeness, something the researcher tries to bridge by engaging in a stronghold analytical stance or by adhering in a strong, empathically way to a certain dazzled fascination concerning its object of study. Both are, in a sense, inevitable. However, our attempt to a neutral stance, and we want to achieve a certain familiarity with them despite all the strangeness. We are quite aware that from the past, we cannot understand more than what in the wink of an eye, heavy with patience, serenity, and mutual forgiveness, that sometimes, through an involuntary understanding, one can exchange with a cat. (Levi-Strauss, 1955, p. 398).

And still, we all aim at a deep, strong relationship with the past, we want it to be real. By using our contemporary time tools and devices, the distant

phenomena become more familiar, and the dialogue more effective as if “they” were here, between us, and provide us in our present time, the answer to a demanding that could be from every researcher: In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotic of art. (Sontag, 1966, p. 10)

Note: The author elaborated all figures.

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