

## **Bela Vista neighbourhood and the influence of Aldo Rossi's discourse in Portugal**

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The influence of Aldo Rossi (1931–1997) on Portuguese architects is closely linked to the emergence of a distinct architectural culture that began to take shape in the late 1960s. His participation in *Casabella* was an important vehicle for the dissemination of his architectural thought. When the need arose to address the housing crisis on a national scale through new institutional mechanisms, studies on urban typology and morphology became foundational to debates on the construction of the future 'residential city.' These discussions continued into the following decades, particularly after the Carnation Revolution of 1974.

Although, as Jorge Figueira (b. 1965) points out, it is not 'easy to construct a linear narrative that situates Aldo Rossi in the Portuguese context'<sup>1</sup>, nevertheless, the impact of his thought has, in a fragmented manner, fueled a discourse that, at various points, has served as a compass to overcome deadlocks in the discipline.

Within the framework of architectural production in the 1970s, the Bela Vista neighbourhood is one of the clearest examples where the 'rossian' framework is prominently expressed. Built under the Setúbal Integrated Plan between 1974 and 1979, it represents an operation with significant territorial impact, bringing issues related to the expansion of cities into suburban areas to the forefront. The planning and design of the buildings were coordinated by José Charters Monteiro (b. 1944), at the time a technician at the Fundo de Fomento da Habitação (Housing Development Fund), a public body responsible for housing policies since 1969.

Charters Monteiro had studied at the Politecnico di Milano, where he was a student of Aldo Rossi, with whom he maintained a relationship of friendship and admiration. The Bela Vista neighbourhood also represented an opportunity to involve Rossi himself in the design of one of the buildings in the plan, which ultimately was not built despite the studies conducted. Rossi's building featured a mixed-use program of housing, commerce, and services and became known as the 'Bacalhau' (Codfish) due to its elongated form, resembling a walled infrastructure with three crossing porticos. Its placement, parallel to the Sado River and aligned with the water tower designed for the site, would have served as a monumental and unifying gesture for that heterogeneous territory. Viewed from the river estuary, this built strip would have been an element of symbolic permanence, countering the fragmentation of the landscape, marked by the presence of the Setúbal port, agricultural areas, residential zones, and industrial units.

The deepening of transformations in the urban morphology of the city as a 'historical and cultural artifact' served as the basis for the Bela Vista plan. This approach revisited infrastructures and urban grids as a foundation for promoting spatial sequences and geometries rooted in collective memory. The plan envisaged interventions across 130 hectares, partially occupied by an urban park extending to the riverfront.

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<sup>1</sup> FIGUEIRA, Jorge (2017). 'Fragmentos Rossianos na Arquitectura portuguesa', in *Dossiê – Arquitectos italianos em Portugal*. Ed. Instituto Italiano di Cultura di Lisbona, p. 35.

Two morphological areas define the proposed volumetry. One, further inland, features built forms arranged to create squares measuring 40 meters per side, drawing analogies with the cloisters of Portuguese convents and monasteries. The other, closer to the river, where Rossi's building would serve as a unifying axis, was positioned between the riverbank escarpment and the urban park, forming typologies that recall the memory of workers' villages.

The residential project of San Rocco in Monza (1966) and the San Cataldo Cemetery in Modena (1972), designed by Aldo Rossi, respectively in collaboration with Giorgio Grassi (b. 1935) and Gianni Braghieri (b. 1945), can be cited as references for the Bela Vista neighbourhood project. The typological clarity in both cases is exemplified by Rossi himself, drawing from the principles of the *Città Analoga*<sup>2</sup>, during his participation in the 1976 Venice Biennale.

Aldo Rossi's book, *L'architettura della città* (1966), translated into Portuguese by Charters Monteiro himself, together with José da Nóbrega Sousa Martins<sup>3</sup> in 1977<sup>4</sup>, serves as the theoretical foundation for the intervention. Rossi's seminal text, resulting from his pedagogical experience in Venice and Milan, becomes an erudite and poetic lens that employs historical knowledge to reveal the effects of capitalism on the configuration of the city's form through the stratification of social classes. In this context, the critique of modern urbanism and the rediscovery of architecture's symbolic dimension underpin the design approach for Bela Vista as a 'praise of civic architecture'<sup>5</sup>.

During the Bela Vista project, Charters Monteiro participated in the *First International Seminar of Architecture in Santiago de Compostela* (I SIAC)<sup>6</sup> in 1976, titled 'Project and Historic City'. The seminar, organized by the Galician College of Architects under the coordination of Aldo Rossi (director) and Salvador Tarragó (secretary), launched a debate on the adverse effects of the accelerated construction triggered by post-war development policies, often devoid of any consideration for the collective value of the city. In Compostela, architecture sought its disciplinary foundations and its role within a transforming society. Santiago de Compostela, as the primary case study of the seminar, allowed for the clarification, as Aldo Rossi noted in his opening remarks, that 'the history of architecture, understood as material of the architecture itself, must be strictly tied to the project'<sup>7</sup>. In addition to José Charters Monteiro and José Sousa Martins, who presented a paper about 'Lisbon', other Portuguese architects also attended the I SIAC<sup>8</sup>. Álvaro Siza's presence was significant, focusing on the theme of 'Atlantic Cities'. By a historical coincidence, the I SIAC took place alongside the dissolution of the emblematic housing programme Serviço de Apoio Ambulatório Local (SAAL) in October 1976. The SAAL program served as an experimental platform for

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<sup>2</sup> ROSSI, Aldo; CONSOLASCIO, Eraldo; REICHLIN, Bruno e REINHART, Fabio (1976) 'La Città Analoga' (1966), Archive La Biennale di Venezia.

<sup>3</sup> Former Aldo Rossi's student as well.

<sup>4</sup> ROSSI, Aldo (1977). *A Arquitectura da Cidade*. Lisboa, Edições Cosmos. (tradução Charters Monteiro e Sousa Martins).

<sup>5</sup> ROSSI, Aldo (1997). 'Elogio da arquitectura civil'. in *JA-Jornal Arquitectos*, nº 174-175, p. 13-14 (original version written in 1980s).

<sup>6</sup> The I SIAC took place between 29th of September and 7th of October, 1976.

<sup>7</sup> ROSSI, Aldo (1976). 'Aldo Rossi, introducción al seminário', in *2C Construction de la Ciudad*, nº 8, p. 60.

the principles of the 'Nouvelle Architecture,'<sup>8</sup> a concept introduced by Gonçalo Byrne (b. 1941) in *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* that same year, in a special issue focused on Portugal's architectural production two years after the fall of the Estado Novo dictatorship.

The Bela Vista neighbourhood was not completed according to its original design, reflecting the fragility of rehousing processes during the democratic period. Its rationalist layout, coupled with the stark simplicity and austerity of its volumes, evokes a melancholic<sup>9</sup> atmosphere that is simultaneously resilient in the face of suburban city fragmentation. This resilience transforms Bela Vista into a manifesto of the disciplinary re-centring envisioned by Rossi.

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<sup>8</sup> Byrne, Gonçalo (1976). "Quelques premisses pour une nouvelle architecture", in *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, n°185, p. 32-33 (faxsimile 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. José Charters Monteiro (1997). 'Uma Construção na azul neblina da memória', in *JA-Jornal Arquitectos*, n° 174-175, p. 28-32.